

“Ethical Considerations in Mentoring for Vocation”

by Paul J. Wadell

St. Norbert College, De Pere, Wisconsin, November 11, 2010

Two weeks ago I participated in a conference held at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto. The focus of the conference was friendship, especially the role of friendship for pastors and ministers. There was much said at the conference that was memorable, but I was particularly taken with a comment by David Wood, a theologian and pastor from Australia who now lives in Glencoe, Illinois. Wood’s presentation focused on the absolute need for friendship in our lives. At one point he said: “We all need a witness to our lives. We need people to love us in the particularity of our lives. Without this, we live in crushing anonymity.”

It seems to me his comment opens up the ethical dimensions of mentoring for vocation. The students we mentor need a witness to their lives and when we agree to mentor them that is the role we undertake. They need people to love them in the wonderful, and sometimes colorful and messy, particularity of their lives, and when we promise to mentor them, that is what we do. And lest they feel bereft and invisible as they navigate their unique journeys through life, they need people willing to recognize them, attend to them, and to help delineate the distinctive gifts and promise of their lives.

This evening I want to use David Wood’s phrase as a lens through which to explore some of the ethical dimensions in mentoring for vocation, and to do so by focusing on three things. First, I want to reflect on why friendship might be a helpful metaphor for understanding a mentoring relationship. What does friendship teach us about mentoring? How are friendship and mentoring similar, but in what ways are they different? What might friendship suggest not only

about the responsibilities we have to students, but also about the responsibilities of the student being mentored? And how might it help us understand the very important matter of boundaries in a mentoring relationship?

Second, I want to consider some virtues that will help us to mentor wisely and successfully. Virtues are skills that help us achieve excellence in the different roles of our lives and we need them if we are to mentor well instead of poorly. And, third, I want to conclude with a brief postscript about the goal of mentoring. What is the good we hope to achieve through the mentoring relationship? To what end or purpose are we mentoring?

Friendship and Mentoring

Why is friendship a fitting way to think about a mentoring relationship? First, a friend is someone who seeks another's good and finds joy in doing so. That is the fundamental definition of a friend and friendship's essential quality. Every real friendship draws us out of ourselves in order to care for others for their own sake, and that is what we do when we mentor. We set aside our own concerns and preoccupations in order to attend to another for their sake. Friendship focuses our attention, our time and our energy, on another's well-being, and that has to be our primary consideration in mentoring. To mentor a student is to *befriend* them. It is to let them know that we want what is best for them and will use the time we have with them to help them discover what that might be.

The word for this is *benevolence*, a key quality of friendship. Benevolence means to wish for another's good. It is the essential attitude of friendship. And *beneficence*, the essential act of friendship, is not just to wish for another's good, but to do what we can to help bring it about.

Friends want what is best for one another and they work to make that possible. That is what friendship is all about, seeking the good of another and delighting in doing so.

This can sound rather straightforward, but think about what goes missing if there is no one in our lives who wants what is best for us, if there is no one truly committed to our good. To have people in our lives who are devoted to our good and really do want what is best for us is a tremendous blessing. But this is especially true for younger persons. To have an adult who genuinely cares for them, an adult who has no other agenda than helping them discover and move toward what is best for them, is an incalculable grace. It is the core moral element in a mentoring relationship. Indeed, to befriend them is a moral act.

Second, to befriend someone is to make space for them in our lives. It is to welcome them in even to the point of rearranging our lives to receive them. This may sound obvious, but we shouldn't overlook what a morally significant thing it is to open our lives to another. Every friendship begins when two or more people make room for one another in their lives and rearrange their lives to receive the other. It's an eloquent act of hospitality and it is what makes friendship possible. Such hospitality is risky because we don't always know how a friendship may challenge us, change us, or possibly hurt us. We don't know what will happen when we make space for a stranger in our lives, but that is how every friendship begins. All our friends were once strangers to us. And the only way they changed from being stranger to friend is that we made space for them because we saw something good in them.

The same is true in mentoring. Mentoring can happen only when two people make space for one another in their lives. As mentors, we can forget how powerful such a seemingly simple act can be. Making room for a student in a mentoring relationship—welcoming them in—is a morally charged act because it is a tremendous affirmation of their dignity. To make this kind of

space for students in your lives is to let them know that you see something good in them, something promising. To welcome them in, to give time to them, and to rearrange your life for them is to let them know that they matter. In David Wood's phrase, it is to promise to be a witness to their lives, and that is a great gift.

Third, if to befriend someone is to seek their good, we cannot do so without taking time to know them. We must gain insight about who the students we mentor really are. We must take the time necessary to discover what might be their unique gifts, their dreams and desires, but also their limitations and struggles, so that we can come to see what really is good for them. Friendship is a form of love and for love to work well it has to be insightful.

The same is true in mentoring. Mentoring requires patience and availability. It requires careful and attentive listening. And it especially requires taking time to learn what is unique about the students who are entrusted to us. We cannot seek what is best for them unless we glean some sense of their soul and spirit, some sense of their "otherness." Put differently, we cannot know them unless we genuinely respect them. Respect can sound so simple, but as soon as we commit to practicing it we realize that it is hard work. Respect literally means to "take a second look." It is the moral vision that attunes us to the unique features of a person's life. Instead of being settled with first impressions, instead of assuming that we know a person, and especially instead of categorizing them or projecting our needs onto them, we "take a second look."

In a mentoring relationship we show respect for the students entrusted to us by carefully attending to them. To attend to a person is to turn toward them and to focus on them. Instead of being distracted or preoccupied, we take note of them and we do so in order to recognize them for who they truly are and can be. To attend to someone is to wait patiently until their identity, their soul and spirit, and their special goodness is revealed to us; indeed, to attend is an act of

contemplation. In his book *The Listening Heart*, A.J. Conyers writes: “To attend to something is to contemplate it along with its purpose, its highest good, its *telos*. Attending to a person means the same thing. It is to consider the person in his or her own concreteness—including circumstances, personality, habits, suffering, hopes, limitations—along with that person’s highest purpose” (65).

Conyers’s comment reminds us that the power of friendship is to shape our lives for the good. But if we are to shape the lives of those we mentor for the good, we must know something about their past, their upbringing, and the pivotal experiences and memories of their lives. If we are to shape their lives for the good, we need to know their joys and successes, but also their struggles, setbacks, losses, and moments of suffering. If we are to guide them wisely into their future, we need to know something of the past that has shaped who they are in the present. We need to know their story.

The students we mentor come to us already having been formed by a variety of stories. We cannot know them, much less help them, without attending to their story, because our stories disclose us. They reveal how we have been shaped, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, by our family background, by the people we have known, by our culture and society, by when and where we were born, and by the pivotal and unforgettable experiences of our lives. The stories of our lives shape our sense of our selves and our sense of the world. They shape our perceptions, our fundamental attitudes, our stance toward life, our values and our convictions. They impact our sense of possibility, and whether or not we believe something promising might be ours.

Many years ago the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr wrote *The Responsible Self*. In that book he said that all our actions are *reactions* to the story we think is being told around us and

the story that has been our life. Niebuhr argued that we act in the present in light of the past we have known and the future we anticipate. This is why we can neither know nor understand a person without knowing his or her story. Our students come to us with stories that are as fascinating, complex, and diverse as they are. Many of those stories, thankfully, are narratives of love and grace and affirmation. But some of them are narratives of pain and sorrow, of shattering losses and disappointments, of deep and abiding hurts, and even of tragedy. For some students their narratives have not inspired hope or confidence, but disillusionment, anxiety, and deep uncertainty.

If we are to befriend them and to help them, we have to let them tell us their story and we have to honor their story. We have to let them know it is a privilege to be invited into their story because their story is their truth, their biography, and they need to speak it. We must honor the sacredness of their story. Even if it is a story of confusion, of muddled choices, or of considerable darkness and pain, it is their story and it is sacred. Unless a student senses this from us, he or she will not have the trust and confidence that is necessary for them to give voice to their story. They need to know we will not betray the story they are sharing with us. When we receive their story as gift and encourage them to speak from their story, we not only stand as a witness to their lives, but we also, as David Wood said, love them in the particularity of their lives.

But we are not only to listen to their story, but also respond to it, and this may mean trying to direct them to a better story. This is why we need to encourage students to ask, “If I enter this story and make it my own, where will it take me? What will it make of me? Or if I stay with this story, will people be able to say about me, “That person really lived!” That is what we want for students. We want to guide them to a narrative that will enable others—as well as

themselves—to make that assessment of their lives. We want to be able to say about them, “That person really lived!” But being able to say that may depend on whether they believe they can live a different story.

There are many ways we can guide students to a better story. One way is by sharing our stories with them. We can invite them into our story in order to show them how we redirected our story to something better, something more hopeful. By sharing our story with them we can give them the confidence they need to know that they can change their story and we will help them do so.

But we have to be careful. We share our narrative in order to benefit them, not in order to turn attention to ourselves. And we have to think carefully about what we share lest what we disclose suggest an intimacy with a student that shouldn't exist. A temptation is to share more with a student than we should. And so it is helpful to remember that whatever we reveal about ourselves is done to help the student become who he or she is called to be—done to truly help them—and not to draw them into our lives in ways that are neither good for them nor just to them.

This suggests that while friendship can be a very helpful way to understand a mentoring relationship and a very helpful way of highlighting the ethical dimensions of that relationship, there are also important ways in which mentoring is different from friendship. One significant difference is that friendships are characterized by mutuality. They are relationships of reciprocal benevolence in which each person seeks the good of the other in similar ways. But in a mentoring relationship we are committed to the good of those we mentor in ways they cannot be committed to us.

Friendships are between equals. But mentoring relationships lack the equality present in the best of friendships; in fact, mentoring relationships rest on the undeniable inequality between the mentor and the student because we have a power and influence over them that they do not have over us. We are called to be attentive to them in ways they cannot possibly attend to us. In short, they may come to us in their need, but we do not go to them in ours.

Similarly, Cicero said that friends share the deepest secrets of their hearts with one another—friends confide in one another—but in a mentoring relationship students confide in us in ways we cannot and ought not with them. In fact, to share the most intimate secrets of our lives with them is to betray the nature of the mentoring relationship. Our role is to attend to them in ways they cannot do for us. To expect more from students than they can offer us is to manipulate them and to subvert the mentoring relationship.

A classic definition of friendship says that friends are of “one soul.” It is a beautiful image that captures the intimacy of friendship and the communion that can exist among friends. But it is not a good description of a mentoring relationship. As mentors our role is to care about the soul or spirit of the students we mentor, not to become one soul with them.

If we remember that as mentors we are to befriend students in ways they cannot befriend us, we will be able to maintain the benefits that come from thinking of the mentoring relationship through the lens of friendship. I think there are many. One benefit is that the language of friendship keeps the mentoring relationship from being depersonalized and from becoming overly professionalized. Friends like one another and enjoy one another’s company. The same is true with the students we commit to mentoring. We accept the invitation because we like them, care for them, and enjoy their company, and they feel the same about us or else they wouldn’t

have asked us. This keeps the relationship from going stale and becoming just one more thing to do.

Second, friendship makes the mentoring relationship more of a covenant than a contract. Covenants are special relationships characterized by mutual regard, specific expectations and responsibilities, and fidelity. It is in this context that we can reflect on the ethical responsibilities of the student who is mentored. They may not owe us what we owe them, but they definitely owe us something. Covenants are built on promises. If we promise something to the students, they promise something to us as well. They promise to take the relationship seriously, to keep appointments, to be willing to grow and to be challenged, to be open, reflective and thoughtful, and genuinely to enter into conversation with us. They promise to be honest and truthful with us, to respect the nature of the relationship, and not to violate the trust that a mentoring relationship requires.

Third, thinking of mentoring as a befriending relationship helps us discern and honor the boundaries in the relationship. To befriend a student is to seek their good, and if that remains our utmost intention and concern, we will not transgress any boundaries. Friendship establishes a natural boundary in the mentoring relationship. To transgress that boundary is to violate the very meaning of the relationship as one of friendship. In other words, if I cross that boundary I have changed the nature of the relationship because I am no longer seeking their good.

Too, thinking of mentoring as friendship reminds us that good mentors must be people of character, integrity, and virtue, just as good friends must be. Professional codes of conduct and defined boundary markers are necessary for mentoring relationships, but they are not sufficient. If we focus on them alone we overlook the crucial importance of character and virtue for good mentoring.

But friendship is important for how we think about boundaries in another way. In the talk he gave at the friendship conference in Toronto, David Wood said, “Certain key friendships in our lives make other friendships possible.” His point is that we need healthy, intimate primary friendships in our lives to help us understand how to enter into secondary friendships such as mentoring. He suggested that the best defense against inappropriate intimacy, whether physical, psychological, or emotional, is appropriate intimacy in other relationships of our lives. When appropriate intimacy is lacking or lost, inappropriate intimacy often enters in. And so perhaps the best assurance of not violating boundaries in a mentoring relationship is having healthy, substantive, and honest relationships elsewhere in our lives. As Wood put it, such friendships help us keep a center of gravity in our lives—they provide ballast—so that we don’t get out of balance in other relationships.

Virtues for Mentoring

Virtues are skills that help us achieve excellence in the various roles and responsibilities of our lives. And so what virtues might be particularly pertinent for mentors? We have already mentioned some such as benevolence and beneficence, trust and confidentiality, honesty and fidelity. There are many others, but I want to briefly mention four: prudence, humility, an empathetic imagination, and detachment.

The first of the cardinal virtues, prudence is the virtue of *practical wisdom* because it helps us see the most fitting way to do the good in all the different situations of our lives. The philosopher Josef Pieper describes prudence as “the perfected ability to make right decisions” no matter what might be facing us. Aquinas speaks of it as the capacity “to deliberate well” about

what needs to be done, which is certainly a skill we need in mentoring students. When students share their story with us or ask us for guidance and advice, prudence helps us discern how we should respond. Perhaps the philosopher John Casey captures the essence of prudence when he speaks of it as “intelligent goodness.” Prudence brings intelligence, insight, thoughtfulness, and ingenuity to our actions so we do not misfire on the good we want to do.

Prudence is an essential virtue for mentors because it reminds us that good intentions are not enough. A well intentioned mentor isn't necessarily a good mentor. When it comes to helping students, we can have all the good intentions in the world, but still do harm if we cannot see a situation clearly. Prudence connects good intentions with good means in order to produce good results. As Raymond Devettere puts it, prudence “looks for a good move” so that we can do what is right and good in the best way possible.

A second virtue that is indispensable for mentors is humility. Humility is clarity of vision about ourselves and about how we stand in relationship with others. It is an honest appreciation of ourselves that allows us to honestly appreciate and esteem others. It is the virtue that allows us to be a friend and companion instead of a competitor or manipulator, and that's because humility frees us from having to pretend we are somebody we are not.

What the students who come to us look for in us, perhaps more than anything else, is authenticity, and authenticity is impossible without humility. They want to see us as persons who don't have to pretend to be somebody else because we are secure in who we are. The word humility comes from the Latin *humus*, which means ground or soil or of the earth. A humble person is “of the earth” in the sense that he or she is grounded, rooted, and centered. Knowing who they are and where they stand, they keep things in perspective. By contrast, a proud person

is not grounded or rooted, and thus their estimation of themselves, as well as others, is distorted. Pride skews our vision, humility purifies it.

A third skill we need in order to mentor well is an empathetic imagination. With an empathetic imagination we try to see things from the perspective of another, especially someone whose background and experience may be very different from our own. The students we mentor are unlike us in important respects. I'm often surprised by how different their background, history, and story is from my own, and sometimes stunned by all that has happened to them in their relatively short lives. If we are to help students on their way to discovering and living out their call, we must, in Monika Hellwig's great phrase, "build bridges of empathy" with them (*Public Dimensions of a Believer's Life*, 108). This means we do our best to cross over from our world into theirs, at least to the extent that we try to imagine what it is like to be them. With an empathetic imagination, we do our best to enter into their experience; we try to see the world through their eyes.

Finally, mentoring requires cultivating an attitude of detachment. Detachment is akin to humility because with an attitude of detachment I am able to set aside my ego, my needs, and my ambitions in order to focus generously on the needs and well-being of others. In a spirit of detachment my focus is not on what I can get from a mentoring relationship, but what I can give to it. Too, with detachment I allow a student to discover who they called to be, not who I might want, hope, or need them to be. Detachment is essential if we are to treat the students we mentor justly. Detachment guides how we use our influence with those we mentor.

I want to conclude with a brief postscript about how we might understand the goal of mentoring. We can talk about helping students discover their unique gifts. We can talk about helping them awaken to what gives them passion and energy. We can ask them what brings them

most hope for the future or what they can give themselves to wholeheartedly. But they might not yet know how to answer those questions. And so perhaps our goal can be more modest.

At the end of *Awakening Vocation*, Edward Hahnenberg's recent book on a Christian theology of vocation, he says, "we come to see who we *really* are" (232) only by moving beyond who we already are. It is one way to think about what we are trying to achieve with the students who are entrusted to us. They come to us at very different places on their journeys. It is unlikely that in the time they have with us that they will come to a completely solid understanding of where their journey is headed or how it will unfold. But we can help them move beyond who they already are so that they can come to a better sense of who they really.

Perhaps the best way to do this is to remind them of what we discover in mentoring them, namely, that we grow by giving, that we discover our selves in moving outside of our selves, and that we are most fully alive when, as in mentoring, we attend to the neighbor before us as we faithfully try to live out our calls.