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Mentor and Get Out of the Way — A Short Advice to Elders

by Jonathan Vogel-Borne

Age-Appropriate Earnestness

One of the more earnest young people I know is a tremendously gifted Quaker minister. Before his life got over filled with a demanding job, we had monthly videoconference check-ins. We began each session with a time of centering, silent-waiting prayer and then one or the other of us would speak out of the silence about our present spiritual condition and relevant activities. We divided the time so that each of us had an opportunity to listen and to speak. Our individual sharing was followed by observations, reflections, deep conversation, and then we concluded in prayer.

Over the years, I often teased my friend about his earnestness. “Come on, lighten up,” I would say, poking fun at one of his passionate, angstful expressions. I am 30 years his senior and, in recalling my own youthful enthusiasm, I remember that I too was once accused of over-earnestness. When I was in my late thirties I applied for the position of Field Secretary for New England Yearly Meeting (Quakers). In a letter of recommendation for the role, one of my mentors stated, “While some people think that Jonathan is too earnest, I am not among them.” Well, it takes one to know one.



Photo courtesy of Jonathan Vogel-Borne.

John Green, author of *The Fault in Our Stars*, a young adult novel about teenagers living with and dying of cancer, comments that “Adults underestimate the emotional depth of adolescents,” he says “I love the intensity teenagers bring, not just to first love, but also to the first time you’re grappling with grief, at least as a sovereign being—the first time you’re taking on why people suffer and whether there’s meaning in life, and whether meaning is constructed or derived. Teenagers feel that what you conclude about these questions is going to *matter*. And they’re dead right. It matters for adults, too, but we’ve almost taken too much power away from ourselves. We don’t acknowledge on a daily basis how much it matters.”

I am looking to recover age-appropriate earnestness, because how we live out the answers to these questions really does matter. One message I hear is stay fresh, stay at the beginning. As Jesus says, “Unless you become like little children, you will not enter the realm of God.” In my years of working for

Quakers, I have seen us at our very worst. I have had any number of experiences that could have led me to cynicism and dismay about the Quaker way. Yet time and time again I encounter a newcomer to one of our meetings who tells me with great fervor that sitting in the meeting for worship has literally saved their lives. Wow, do I want to stand near that!

Mentor

A central piece of my ministry is to seek intentional spiritual friendships. My earnest young friend is one of about 40 people with whom I am in regular contact, most on a monthly basis, a few less often. With the local folks I make lunch dates, have late afternoon tea, or go for morning walks or coffee. With the people at a distance, I do phone calls or video calls. The format of these sessions is similar to that described above—silent waiting, centering prayer, check-ins, responses, and concluding with prayer. I am so grateful to have the space in my life to welcome each one of these dear friends into my heart's circle.

These relationships are mutual mentoring. A mentor is a trusted advisor, counselor, confidant, and is usually assumed to be an older person taking a younger person under their wing. In my case, though, I look at mentoring as being similar to the traditional Quaker role of Elder. The Elder is one who, through prayer, listens for, holds and draws forth God's Spirit in individuals and communities, but is not necessarily a person who is old in years—deep in spiritual experience, yes—but just being old does not qualify. Some people have more experience in one area or another and it is through that experience that they mentor or elder others. Mutual mentoring is similar to being a sponsor in a 12-step program. We are all in this program; we are all in this life, together.

Get Out of the Way

Just as I was entering my 60s, God sent me a clear message, "Mentor and get out of the way." I was already deep in the mentoring business, but getting out of the way is more difficult. In a spiritual sense, getting out of the way means letting the Holy Spirit do its work without me impeding it. In a more practical way it means empowering others to move into leadership. My direct response to "get out of the way" was that after 21 years, in January 2013, I left my long-time job as a Quaker denominational executive.

I now employ a get-out-of-the-way discernment practice on all leadership opportunities that come my way. I ask very concretely, "Is this opportunity for someone other than me?" Is there someone else who is ready for this opportunity or whose gifts for the community would thrive as they grew into the role? I am particularly led to encourage new leadership. Oftentimes, but not always, that is someone younger than me.

American culture tends to disrespect the wisdom of older people. We warehouse them in gated communities, retirement facilities, and nursing homes. We encourage people to spend their retirement years filled with all the leisure money can buy. Clearly not all older people embrace these messages and many do find the time they never had to pursue relationships, projects and ministries that vitally contribute to the healing of our planet. Yet, now that I am getting older, I see the phase of my life as householder coming to an end. My children are launched in careers, the house and college are paid for and my spouse and I are looking not at an empty nest, but at an open sky. What's next? Mentor and get out of the way.



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