

The Heart of Love: The Legacy of Mentors

Every so often, a book on death and dying climbs to the top of the New York Times Bestseller List. Books like Sherwin Nuland's *How we die* was popular in the early 90's. Then came Mitch Albom's *Tuesday's with Morrie*, followed by other, somewhat similar books. Together, these volumes have sold millions of copies.

Why? In secular death denying America, what could possibly touch such a nerve? Why have so many people purchased these books for themselves and for those they love? Albom's book, in particular, has staying power. It's still in bookstores, still frequently purchased, along with is more recent titles. Why do so many people continue to read through *Tuesdays with Morrie*, weeping with Mitch as his beloved teacher becomes ill, weakens, and eventually dies?

The answer, I think, lies in a longing hidden deep within the life of each of us.

'*Maurie*,' it seems to me, taps into an unconscious nostalgia, a longing for a time not long ago, when people were rooted in a community where family, friends, neighbors, and yes, even old teachers, were cherished and cared for. When the 'time for dying' came, more often than not, they were accompanied by loved ones who rehearsed with them what Earnest Becker calls 'the greatest victory imaginable—a person bravely facing his or her own extinction.'

For Christians, this spiritual mentorship is rooted not only in nostalgia, but also in the gospel. Holy men and women, whom we call Saints, have rehearsed this central drama with us for centuries. Indeed, 'the greatest victory imaginable' is for us 'the Triumph of the Cross.' We are commanded, not requested, to 'love one another.' And to see and care for Jesus in the person of the suffering.

In the book, "*In His Image*" Christian authors Phillip Yancy and Paul Brand detail the extraordinary way in which our bodies are 'wonderfully made.' On the cover of the book is a replication of the scene in Sistine Chapel where the hand of God is seen stretching towards Adam's hand—and the distance separating them is not very far at all.

Before he died in Seattle some years ago, Dr. Brant spent most of his medical career caring for leprosy patients and teaching Indian medical students and residents to do likewise. In 'In His Image,' Brant tells the story of the day he realized an important truth about teaching, about learning, and about great mentorship.

One day, when he was rounding in a medical ward in one of India's larger hospitals, he and several resident doctors were examining a Hindu woman. They had the curtains drawn around her for privacy when the senior resident began to examine the woman. As Dr. Brand and the others watched, this new physician gently, with great respect, began to question the woman about her medical condition. He leaned in to speak to her. His tone, gestures, intonation, and questions were filled with a respect for her dignity and with professional tenderness.

As he looked at the scene, Brand was struck by the peculiar sensation of déjà vu.

He watched, astonished, remembering the long ago day when as a young resident he had witnessed the very same gestures, the exact combination of respect and professional tenderness. But that had been in England, more than fifty years before! And the physician then was not a young Indian doctor but his favorite professor—a British physician who had in time become his own mentor.

But how could this be? How could a twenty year old from across the world replicate exactly the masterful technique of a man long dead—a man Brand knew had never left England? How?

As soon as they were finished examining the woman, Dr. Brandt confronted the surprised resident doctor. He asked him: ‘Where did you learn that? That tone, that gesture, the way you touched the woman with such respect?’

The student looked at him, perplexed. Then another student spoke up.

“Dr. Brand,” he said, “We have all seen that interaction before today. We have witnessed it many times. Each time you examine a patient that is the tone you speak in, the gestures you use, and the touch. He learned it from you. We all have.”

It was then that Dr. Brand realized—with great humility and no small degree of awe—that he had indeed brought his old professor with him to India. And that the wonderful soul of an old English gentleman was evidencing itself in the tenderness of students across a world of time, of distance, of culture.

Great mentors in life, be they mothers or teachers, neighbors or pastors, give us particular images of kindness, of faith, of love. Like the hand Michelangelo painted reaching across the ceiling of the Sistine chapel toward God, we are called to reach across the universe towards God and one another.

What we Christians have learned is that this distance is not very far at all. Not very far at all.

That distance, where we become the living love of God for one another, is as close as the example of those who have formed us to be who we are. It is as close as our closest neighbor and as close as the heart of love.

In each of our lives, there are many examples of living love. Each one of us has been blessed with great souls crossing the paths of our lives—humble souls who enlivened us with the wisdom, confidence, and hope necessary to live in this world.

And make a difference.

Working as a hospice nurse, I learned to bathe the face of every dying person with the same compassion and tenderness with which my own mother bathed my face as a small child. The faith and tenderness shown to me at a young age by Catholic Religious Sisters such as Mother

McMonagle, Sister Kramer, Sister Ebey, Sister Flaherty, and so many more have enabled me as an adult to bring comfort to thousands of dying people and their families.

Working as the director of several organizations on behalf of disability rights, I needed every bit of the richness in logic, thought, and faith shown to me by Mrs. Mosher, Sister O'Dea, Mr. Shoemaker, Mr. Leonard and so many more from the school I attended from first grade until the through high school.

And now, as I care for retired Catholic Religious Sisters, I am reminded again about the power—and preciousness of mentorship of the Spirit. Because these women of grace are indeed heroes of soul; giants of heart who helped to build our communities with the strong heart of love. And who still, perhaps even more than when they were more active, fuel our lives with high octane prayers mingled with sweetly offered suffering.

Of course I cannot forget my own personal '*Maurie*'—the sentinel teacher of my youth-- the inimitable Madame Mayenzet. This extraordinary woman had two PhDs from the Sorbonne and spoke at least five languages. But instead of teaching the best of the brightest at Yale or Princeton, Madame Mayenzet chose to labor in at an obscure girl's school.

Rather than amassing the recognition and prestige (not to mention the salary) a university position would have afforded her, she chose to make a profound difference in the lives of the young women she taught, enlivening them with her spirit, challenging them with her intellect. Madame Mayenzet taught young women because she wanted 'to give girls their voices', to mentor growing young women in confidence, to prepare them to be leaders.

And mentor, she did.

Madame Mayenzet believed, or she let me believe she believed, that I was truly an extraordinarily student of French. Actually, at the time I was average, perhaps even below average. But Madame Mayenzet believed me to be much more than average—it was clear to me: she thought I was something special.

And because she believed it, I became it.

Before long, I found myself studying and working harder than I would have—just so I wouldn't disappoint her. And soon, this newfound confidence found its way into our Senior Seminar class where in true Madame Mayenzet style, she had us reading, along with Aristotle and Aquinas, Plato's Allegory of the Cave—in French!

I am convinced that Madame saw God's intent for my life—and imbued me with that intent, even before I had the 'Holy Spirit Tools' to recognize it in myself. For her, for myself, and for God, I became that woman she saw many years before—the humble 'masterpiece' she saw nascent within the gangly awkwardness of a shy, pimpled teenager.

Many years later, across the world, in Cameroon West Africa, I found myself teaching nursing students in an obscure mountain village, following Madame Mayenzet's example in using the

Socratic method, without even recognizing it was she who set it before me. I found myself believing in these young men and women; seeing in them the imprimatur of God's loving providence, encouraging them to go past where they believed they could go.

Then came the day at the end of the school year when a little contingent of my African students came to tell me:

'You believed us to be great students and so we have become them. Because of you, we will go to the villages of Cameroon and teach others as you have taught us.'

So you see the distance between God and his children is not far. Not far at all.

Across the world in a country very different from our own, today a teacher is teaching with the face of Madame Mayenzet and a nurse is bathing the face of a person dying of AIDS with the loving expression of my mother.

And it did not start there.

Because my mother is an alumna of schools where Sacred Heart Religious Sisters taught as well.

When she was small, she was taught by Mother Bourret and Mother Mary Brown. And my Mom was bathed in love by her mother, my Grandma Dennehy. And Mother Bourret was bathed by her mother and taught by sisters whose names we do not know. And so it goes back to the founder of the Sacred Heart order of nuns, St. Madeleine Sophie, whose feast is May 25th incidentally, the birth day of my two youngest children, twins.

Indeed, the tapestry of meaning, fostered by the mentorship of lovingkindness, goes back even further than Madame Mayenzet or Saint Madeline Sophie—it extends to those that taught both—to their own mothers and to the women who taught young girls many years ago in France and Belgium. This thread of particular grace—the thread of grace that so influenced my students in Africa, stretches even further into the past—beyond Sr. Madeleine Sophie, all the way back to her Mentor, a Jewish carpenter. And to His disciples.

It stretches even farther back, to the Beginning, to his Father and our Father. His Abba, our Pappa.

There we find the core for any education and center of all life.

That core—that Coeur—is love.

I would like to describe one last woman who is a mentor 'par excellence.' This woman was my childhood neighbor and so much more-- a woman whose faith, courage, grace, and beauty have helped me and so many others beyond her own 12 children to be and to do all that we ever have. How to describe the mentoring that began for me when I showed up knocking at her door each day to play for hours with her daughters Kathleen, Julie, Sheila and Trisha—my dear friends then as now.

My ‘neighbor lady,’ Katie McKay, taught me to live in love long before I happened through the doors of school and long after I left Capital Hill where I grew up to venture forth into the ‘other’ world. She is indeed a hero—my hero. Katie McKay, who lived with the cross of severe pain and the crippling effects of quadriplegia for the last eighteen years of her life, taught me the truth of living life as a human **being**—and not a human **doing**.

Her heart, her Coeur, was so lovely, so beautiful to behold, that it was present powerfully in her eyes—the only part of her unaffected by the cross of her daily existence. Those eyes—Irish eyes—expressed all the joy and sorrow, kindness and love of a lifetime of Being-in Love. From her heart, through her eyes, and into my life came the power of sacrificial love—the love of the Redeemer, made manifest through the powerless limbs, suffering body, and magnificent soul of one of the bravest women I have ever known.

Far too many in our culture never see—because they will not allow themselves to perceive—the transparent glory of the Katie McKay’s who live in our midst. Instead we see human beings only as a sum of functional working parts. Unfortunately, many of us, including our elder population, identifies themselves with what they used to ‘do’ instead of who they ‘are,’ with functionality vs. wisdom, with existing as a *human doing*, vs. a *human being*.

Katie McKay knew the difference—though she discovered it on the cross. She knew that we are *human beings—beings of majesty and beauty, hope and glory, trapped within a hillside of marble, soon to be freed by the Artist-who-Loves*. And in the meantime, all of us—no matter our so called ‘functional capacity,’—are vessels of grace, instruments of peace.

Like Katie McKay, my hero.

This is the core—the Coeur— of a life well lived: to show the face of love to the world and to one another. The loving kindness we learned from our mothers and from our mentors is the loving kindness of our dear Lord and Savior—whose own face was bathed when he was a child by his mother Mary and again by her after he was crucified.

The heart of a life well-lived is summarized in a song that is the motto of every Sacred Heart school in the world.

It is the very same song I have sung in my car alone as I drive from one dying patient’s house to another. The same song I sang to each of my children—girls and boys—when they were in my womb. (I always feel like being pregnant is like a nine month blue light prayer special—“Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”) And the same song I sang them in French almost every night as a lullaby when they were young.

You see, I want my children to know the heart of love is the heart of Jesus.

The song, of course, is Coeur de Jesus...Heart of Jesus. The first refrain gives word to the mentorship of the Holy Spirit, the mysterious way in which God has chosen to redeem us and to use us, his children, as instruments of his peace.

Coeur de Jesus savez le monde...”
“Heart of Jesus, who saves the world...”

This song shows that the distance between all of us in this village we call the world, is not very far, not very far at all. Despite differing countries, languages, and centuries, St. Madeleine Sophie, Madame Mayenzet, Katie McKay, the Catholic Religious Sisters, my mother—and the entire communion of saints, have given us the confidence and the courage to live in the very heart of love.

The only distance separating us, is the distance between the heart of Jesus and the love we extend in his name—in His Image—to one another.

A distance that is not far at all— the distance between one hand reaching out to another in love.

May God bless each of us with kindness and the tenderness of his love. And may he help us too see in one another His Image...

Adapted from a speech given by Eileen Geller at *Forest Ridge School* in Bellevue WA.