

One woman, now a pediatrician working with infants born to mothers addicted to crack, revealed how the mentoring relationship may be costly to both: "We've maintained a close relationship even though I didn't follow the path that she [the mentor] would have liked. She would have liked to see me in research. She respects what I do, particularly now that I've had some successes. But when I first started out, it wasn't OK. I think she was very disappointed."

A form of mentoring that can dissipate some of these pitfalls while offering strategic formative power is the mentoring community.

Mentoring Communities

If a young adult is going to be initiated into a profession, organization, or corporation as it is presently defined and practiced, a mentor who guides the way is enough. But if one is going to be initiated into a profession, organization, or corporation and the societies they serve *as they could become*, then only a mentoring community will do.

Because we are social beings, if each new generation is to contribute to the ongoing creation and renewal of life and culture, young adults need more than to be challenged individually to realize their full potential. They need to know they will not be alone—or alone with "just my mentor." If they are going to have the courage to take the road less traveled because it represents a more worthy truth, then they must discover that in doing so they will encounter a new sociality: a trustworthy network of belonging. Ideas and possibilities take hold in the imagination of the young adult in the most profound ways when he or she is met by more than a mentor alone—by a mentoring community.

Mentoring communities include a mentor who functions in the terms just described, providing recognition, support, challenge, and inspiration. But the mentor may or may not be devoted to or sustain a dialogue with a single protégé alone. Rather, the mentor, or a team of mentors, create a mentoring environment: a context in which a new, more adequate imagination of life and work can be composed, anchored in a sense of *we*. Mary Jo Bona, Jane Rinehart, and Rose Mary Volbrecht have elegantly described the special benefits of *co-mentoring*, by which they mean the formation of a learning environment in which the leadership team members model mutual support and challenge among each other. This evokes comparable relationships among the students, creating a mentoring environment that is characterized by a heightened degree of trust and enhanced capacity for engaging and challenging everyone.⁹

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In the study for *Common Fire*, it became apparent that although people in later adult life may appear to sustain significant commitments to the common good with little or no support, courageously going against the tide, in fact they carry within them a deep sense of *we*. This conviction is often forged in the young adult years in association with a group of others around inspiring ways of thinking and working in the world. Even if they have not necessarily maintained direct contact with the others who shared their experience of a young adult mentoring community, the confidence of participation in a commonwealth of aspiration and commitment is sustained.¹⁰

Mentoring communities are particularly essential to the formation of adult faith. Since young adulthood is a time of critically recomposing a sense of self and world and the nature of the ultimate-intimate reality that holds both, the young adult imagination is appropriately dependent upon a network of belonging that can confirm a worthy, "owned" faith. When necessary, the same community must contradict the composing of a weaker faith, one unable to stand up to the challenges of the diverse and morally complex world in which today's young adults will live out their adulthood.¹¹

Features of a Mentoring Environment

Mentoring communities play an essential role in the formation of a faith that can ground ongoing meaning and purpose throughout adulthood. They do so by incorporating certain features that distinctively honor and animate the potential of young adult lives and nourish the renewal of culture for the common good. These include a network of belonging, big-enough questions, encounters with otherness, important habits of mind, worthy dreams, access to key images, concepts (content), and practices that mediate these gifts of a mentoring community.

A Network of Belonging

A mentoring community is a network of belonging that constitutes a spacious home for the potential and vulnerability of the young adult imagination in practical, tangible terms. It offers a sociality that works (at least well enough) physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually as the young adult becomes more fully at home in the universe. A mentoring network of belonging may be sustained for only a relatively brief but influential period of time, or it may extend for many years.

While the young adult is reimagining self and world on the other side of critical thought, a trustworthy network of belonging serves as the community of confirmation and contradiction that is so essential to the practice of a faithful imagination. Jonathan, a young adult, participates in an annual summer program for college students that intentionally builds an interfaith mentoring community to serve the formation of faith and commitment to the common good. Upon his return to the program the second summer, he described this aspect of his experience:

Over this past year, any time I had a problem or something that I didn't think that any of my friends at college would understand, I knew I could always sit down at the computer and send someone a long e-mail . . . and they would reply back. And I knew that even though we weren't all together, I still had the support system—it was just a little bit further away. . . . But it was still the same people, and I knew that they would understand, and that they could help me through it, or give me a suggestion, or at least say, "You're crazy, don't make such a big deal of it, or whatever. It was very reassuring."

Another young adult in the same program said, "We had this great experience, and then everyone leaves, but you know that there's some kind of web or connection out there. You don't just leave it behind. You stretch it out. So that gives me hope, and actually it gives everyone else hope."

The way this works was captured by still another young adult, who said:

I could kind of like put [this community] in a little box, and if something wasn't going right, or if a program I was putting together just didn't seem like it was happening, then I could look back, and it was an inner strength in a lot of ways. I know someone else in this program who's doing something like what I'm doing, and we made a commitment to each other to do this together, and I can't let my part of the commitment down, so I need to step up and be strong here. Just knowing that there are a bunch of people out around the U.S. getting the message out, it made it feel a lot less lonely, and it was definitely like a strength."¹²

In these accounts, we can glimpse how it is that a mentoring community that is a meaningful network of belonging serves both to reassure and to encourage the development of inner-dependence, honoring both the potential and the vulnerability of the young adult.

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Big Enough Questions

Mentoring communities that serve to recompose meaning and faith in the young adult years are particularly powerful in their capacity to extend hospitality to big questions. If the process of imagination and ongoing development is partially prompted by conscious conflict, then big questions play an important role.

Why big? Since faith is the dynamic composing of meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions, questions of little consequence or those that only skim the surface of things can distract and preoccupy us while a larger field of potential consciousness remains assumed, unexamined, or neglected. Over time, it can become stagnant and insufficient, and even begin to disintegrate. In contrast, big questions stretch us. They reveal the gaps in our knowledge, in our social arrangements, in our ambitions and aspirations. Big questions are meaning-full questions, ones that ultimately matter.

What are some of the big questions young adults ask?

Who do I really want to become?

How do I work toward something when I don't even know what it is?

Am I lovable?

Who will be there for me?

Why is suffering so pervasive?

What are the values and limitations of my culture?

Who am I as a sexual being?

Do my actions make any real difference in the bigger scheme of things?

Do I want friendship, partnership, marriage? If so, why? With whom?

What is my society, or life, or God, asking of me? Anything?

What is the meaning of money? How much is enough?

Is there a master plan?

Am I wasting time I'll regret later?

What constitutes meaningful work?

How have I been wounded? Will I ever really heal?

What do I want the future to look like—for me, for others, for my planet?

What is my religion? Do I need one?

What are my real talents, preferences, skills, and longings?
 When do I feel most alive?
 Where can I be creative?
 What am I vulnerable to?
 What are my fears?
 How am I complicit in patterns of injustice?
 Will I always be stereotyped?
 What do I really want to learn?
 Do I want to bring children into the world?
 How do I discern what is trustworthy?
 Where do I want to put my stake in the ground and invest my life?

These are questions of meaning, purpose, and faith; they are rightly asked in every generation, in young adulthood and throughout adult life.

There are also big questions particular to our time in history, or to particular domains of inquiry. For example, Why is there a growing gap between the haves and have-nots? Why is the prison population growing in the United States? Why are antidepressants being prescribed for increasing numbers of children? What are the reasons for climate change? Why is the nature of the economic-political process—nationally and globally—a matter of increasing complexity and concern?

All of these questions are about the relationship of self and world. When we are younger, we can defer these questions to others, but becoming adult means increasing capability and responsibility for our own participation in the life of the commons and our own knowledge and action. These are questions of consequence that can't be simply ducked as irrelevant or "not my concern."

Yet it is my observation that many young adults, even those who are regarded as privileged, are often being cheated in a primary way. *They are not being asked big-enough questions.* They are not being invited to entertain the greatest questions of their own lives or their times.

Some are swept up in what I have described elsewhere as the flow of success. Apparently perpetually willing simply to jump the next hurdle, they are at once highly sophisticated in their capacity to calculate opportunity costs, while remaining naïve about the wider context in which their career choices, for example, are being made. As a consequence, they seek power but have little awareness of the reach of their own agency in truly shaping their lives and their world. They are

...ing within various systems upon which they have very little if any critical purchase. That is, they may have the capacity for critical thought, but they use it only within certain limited frames—unable to question the frame itself.¹³

A very bright young businessperson, asked to comment on an investment decision by a health care chain, suggested that certain risks were acceptable “because a community hospital is, after all, simply a piece of real estate that could be liquidated if necessary.” This young adult had not been initiated into the complex social, political, and moral terrain of the commons and the big questions that lurk there.

These and other less-privileged young adults are, like the rest of us, increasingly distracted by the lures of an entertained, consumerist, and anxious society, making their way as best they can, enjoying what life has to offer, and keeping up. For many, the big questions somehow just don't come up, get set aside, or are more or less not worth it since the experts seem to disagree on what the questions are. Or (more cynically), as one young man put it, “It is better not to care than to care and have to deal with the fact that others don't.”

In a mentoring environment that nourishes the formation of adult faith, others do care. There is a place for asking the questions that begin to arise in the imagination of the young adult, from the inside, from that emerging inner authority. There is a willingness to tolerate the conflict (along with both the zest and the anguish) that such questions may raise, in the trust that it may lead to a more faithful imagination. In return, mentoring environments pose questions that the young adult would otherwise not have the privilege of engaging. The mix of questions arising from within and posed from without can create great questions that launch the worthy investment of a lifetime.

Encounters with Otherness

In the interviews that informed *Common Fire*, we discovered that encounters with otherness are the most powerful sources of vital, transforming questions that open into ways of making meaning that can form and sustain commitment to the common good, even if one is not naïve about the complexity of contemporary life. By *otherness* we mean encounters with those outside one's own tribe, those generally regarded as *them* instead of *us*.¹⁴

It has been said that in the life of faith, “God is always revising our boundaries outward.”¹⁵ A primary way this occurs is through an encounter with the other, in which an empathic bond is established that

transcends *us* and *them*, creating a new *we*. This grounds commitment to the *common* good, rather than just to me and mine.

In a constructive encounter with otherness, an empathic bond arises from recognizing that the other suffers in the same way as we, having the same capacity for hope, longing, love, joy, and pain. These are the undergirding features of our humanity that link us with the vast commonwealth of being. The ability to imagine the experience of the other by drawing upon our own well of experience, blending it with the particular features of the other's experience, makes it possible to see through another's eyes, to feel through another's heart, to know something of another's understanding. What one knows of another's experience is always partial. But one of the most significant features of the human adventure is the capacity to take the perspective of another and to be compelled thereby to recompose one's own perspective, one's own faith.

This kind of perspective taking gives rise to compassion (the capacity to suffer with). Compassion in turn gives rise to a conviction of possibility, the sense that there has to be a better way. This conviction of possibility fosters the courage to risk on behalf of more than mere self-interest, recognition that my well-being and the well-being of the other are linked.

Young adulthood is a time of special readiness for this expansion of soul. Loosening the bonds of conventional belonging (which is fostered by critical thought) and developing inner-dependence (with a consequent openness to wonder and exploration) both conspire to set in place a ripeness for meeting and hearing the other.

Just home for the Christmas holiday, a freshman reflected on her experience during a camping trip in college orientation week. She remembered especially meeting other freshmen "who were into the 'hard-core alternative scene' and in high school I would have thought of them as just that. But on the camping trip, there we were, all coping with the rain and the mud, and I discovered that one of them had a cat they hated to leave behind and another had a mom he liked to cook with. I learned to see them for who they are, not what they are."

This doesn't mean that it is necessarily automatic or easier for young adults to entertain unpopular and challenging perspectives within a field of study, or amid the realities of growing diversity in our society. Young adult inner-dependence is fragile, and authority—though more chosen—remains located outside the self. Young adults remain vulnerable to needs for recognition and inclusion in terms that are normative within the networks of belonging to which they have access.¹⁶

Nevertheless, it is not happenstance that in this society and elsewhere we are expecting colleges and universities (and in some measure, the military)—

institutions with young adult populations—to be primary testing grounds for discovering how we will all learn to dwell together within the small planet home we share. In both large and smaller institutions, we bring into close proximity multiple points of view embodied in young adult lives and representing a very broad range of social-cultural perspectives. We expect that they can manage it—and to some degree they often can, precisely because of the young adult readiness I have described. When we must bridge vast cultural differences, there is power in proximity, but proximity alone is often not enough.¹⁷

I remember talking with a young man who graduated from a prestigious university and was embarking on a master's degree in business. I asked him if he could tell me when, if ever, he had significant encounters with people different from himself. He felt he had not, but hoped it would happen in the school in which he was now enrolled, where there was an obvious diversity of American ethnic and international students. He recalled, "At the university where I was an undergraduate, there were a lot of different people, but we all sat in our own section of the dining hall." This experience is common, as all of us tend to seek out our own comfort zone, our own tribe. In a related fashion, some faculty report that increasing numbers of young adults, even the bright and informed, are reluctant to disagree openly with one another, whether in informal or classroom contexts, because the terms of belonging (increasingly fragile in our society as a whole) appear to be set too much at risk by the free exploration of ideas around matters of real consequence.

Constructive, transforming encounters with otherness and true exchange of ideas are facilitated in mentoring communities, where hospitality to otherness is prized and practiced. This can be created in the workplace, in the living space, in the classroom, and on the playing field. In most social environments today, there are many forms of otherness in addition to ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and economic class. In almost every environment, it is useful to take an "otherness inventory" to assess the many divides waiting for creative abrasion. Constructive encounters across any significant divide set at the soul's core an experience of knowing that every assumption may be potentially transformed by an encounter with otherness. Thus the soul becomes more open, expectant, and available to ongoing learning and transformation. Faith develops at the boundary with otherness, when one becomes vulnerable to the consciousness of another, and thus vulnerable to reimagining self, other, world, and "God."

This quality of engagement with otherness is dependent, however, upon the practice of key habits of mind.¹⁸ One of the gifts of a mentoring context

is initiation into the habits of mind that make it possible for young adults to hold diversity and complexity, and to wrestle with moral ambiguity, developing deeper wells of meaning and purpose and larger and stronger faith.

Habits of Mind

A mentoring environment that prepares young adults for today's world appropriately can and necessarily must assist in creating norms of discourse and inclusion that invite genuine dialogue, strengthen critical thought, encourage connective-holistic awareness, and develop the contemplative mind.

DIALOGUE. Dialogue is not just talk. It is a way of being in conversation with others that involves a good deal of listening, desire to understand, and willingness to be affected—to be moved and informed, and to change one's mind. In a sound-bite world, the art and practice of dialogue is relentlessly at risk. Dialogue requires time and space, and it has to be learned.

Diana Eck, a professor and director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, is providing significant leadership in opening pathways into the multireligious reality of today's societies. She has written: "Dialogue in which we listen as well as speak may seem so commonsensical it is scarcely worth making a fuss over. And yet dialogue, whether between women and men, black and white, Christian and Hindu, has not been our common practice as an approach to bridging differences with understanding. Power and prestige make some voices louder, give some more airtime, and give the powerful the privilege of setting the terms for communication. . . . Today the language of dialogue has come to express the kind of two-way discourse that is essential to relationship, not domination. One might call it mutual witness. . . ."19

Unless they have become armored and cynical, young adults are particularly open to cultivating the art of dialogue because it is a satisfying means of honoring one's growing curiosity about self and world. **When** one speaks and then is heard—but not quite, and therefore tries to **speak** yet more clearly—and then listens to the other—and understands, but **not** quite, and listens again—one becomes actively engaged in sorting out what is true and dependable within oneself and about one's world. **How** one makes meaning is composed and recomposed in this process. **This can** occur in a wide variety of contexts when mentors embody and **establish** norms of discourse that foster genuine encounter and engagement.

Where models and expectations of this kind of conversation are nourished and there is support for learning its forms and rhythms, more than dialogue can be learned. Dialogue tills the soil for the growth of critical thought.

CRITICAL THOUGHT. As described earlier, critical thought is the capacity to step outside of one's own thought and reflect upon it as object, to recognize multiple perspectives and the relativized character of one's own experience and assumptions. One becomes a young adult in faith when one can begin to reflect critically on one's own ways of making meaning at the level of ultimacy. Mentoring environments that serve the formation of adult faith extend hospitality to critical thought and invite its further development.

Nourished by compelling questions, critical thought also flourishes if young adults are invited to test their responses (their mental and practical powers) in a supportive and challenging milieu of differing perspectives that awaken more adequate means of seeing and being. But to lead to viable commitment rather than mere combative individualism, relativism, or cynicism, when this occurs it must be met in ways that sustain a deepening, refining dialogue. Renee Lertzman has written:

It was the day after our professor, Carlos Norena, lectured on Kant that I felt something slipping away from me. I was in my dorm room, looking out the window at the redwoods, and the view of the Pacific Ocean beyond the knoll. I suddenly had the sense that I had no idea what was real and what wasn't and how to tell the difference. Under this new gaze, the chair, the table, the cup, all became questionable entities in the universe, each containing their own subjectivity, truth, and meaning. Coherency was elusive and beyond my grasp. How was I to know what was going on here? How could I continue to live—buy groceries, run errands, call friends—if I did not know?

I went to Carlos' office that day, and told him, "I don't know what is real and what isn't. I am thinking of dropping out of school to do organic farming. At least I know that growing carrots is real. . . ." He laughed and said to me in his thick Spanish accent, "Let's not do anything too drastic here. I suggest you take up swimming."

Since that day in my freshman year in college, I have felt a sort of "waking up" from sleepwalking through life. . . . I was perplexed by my own catapult into wanting to know what life was about. . . . Why was no one talking about this?

It was when I left college midway for an eight-week field study in the Sierra Nevada Mountains studying "nature philosophy and religion"

that I began to locate this inquiry in the larger context of how we live among others—humans and non-human species. For two months, we lived in various wilderness areas. We walked between worlds; drinking the cold clear waters of the mountains while making plans to return to the streets, lamps, steel and glass. To step into wilderness is to see how complex our relationship with the ecological world is, and to see more clearly what we have determined as “meaningful.” . . .

The questions I was asking that first year in college did not go away; they only deepened, found new contexts and arenas. I had a professor once who jokingly called me “ontologically insecure” like the people on the Star Trek holodeck. It is as if to question reality and living deeply . . . can actually unhinge one’s attachment to normative reality, so as to occupy a space of “always looking in.” This sense of being ontologically insecure, I have come to see, is where I draw my strength; . . . I have also come to see that to question and investigate life, on the deepest levels possible, is to walk on a rim of sorts. . . . For me, the life worth living is to have the courage to be on the rim, and tolerate the space of not knowing, and honor what is known.

The people I look to as role models and teachers are those who live contemplatively, ask keen questions, and tolerate uncertainty. They thrive on the rim. Their minds are like diamonds, glittering with inquiry and beauty . . . deeply engaged with the world of the living.²⁰

CONNECTIVE-SYSTEMIC-HOLISTIC THOUGHT. In an increasingly diverse and complex world, however, critical thought alone is insufficient for the tasks of citizenship and faith. The capacity to see distinctions and difference must be combined with the capacity to discover the fitting connections among things, to recognize how the vast tissue of life is dynamically and interdependently composed. This is a critical feature of the composing of an adult faith that can stand the test of time and support lasting commitments and effective action.

An international student, making the transition from Authority-bound ways of knowing to a critical-systemic perspective in a graduate school master’s program, described his experience this way:

I don’t know whether it’s good or bad, but the way my brain works now has changed a lot. It’s like a large flywheel which has been spun, and you can’t stop it anymore. Before it was kind of an unstructured approach to the surrounding environment. You saw facts around you but you weren’t able to select and structure them—just to place them on a kind of shelf in your brain. But now it’s more like you are inclined

just to analyze all the facts of life and try to structure them and place them on different tiers in your brain. This actually is my concern because now there is a brain inclination of using the tools [systemic ways of seeing and new theoretical perspectives in his profession] maybe not on relevant events in my life, even on the way the world is working. It's a stress . . . because you can't do it; you can't apply this to the *whole* world around you.

What we hear in the reflection of this young adult is the capacity for critical thought; he can think about his own thinking. In addition, we hear the capacity for connective-systemic thought: the ability to structure the facts, placing them in relationship to one another. We hear also a question of faith: "Can I apply this to the whole world?" His answer seems to be no. Theories that may interpret some aspects of life, though powerful and compelling, may not be adequate to interpret the whole of life. Mentoring environments that serve the formation of an adequate faith not only attend to discrete aspects of life but also welcome and encourage grappling with ways of seeing the whole of life. This is the kind of big question that young adults are ready to ask.

A CONTEMPLATIVE MIND. Big questions, prompted by dialogue with otherness and the critical thought it nourishes, activate the reimagination of meaning and faith, thus repatterning the connections among things. For this to happen in strong and trustworthy ways requires, as we have seen, the moment of pause—contemplation. Particularly because the phenomenon of busy-ness has become so pervasive, contemplative pause is increasingly crowded out of our experience. Mentoring contexts that most profoundly serve the formation of adult faith provide an initiation into the power of pause.

The Contemplative Mind in Society, a nonprofit organization initially sponsored by two foundations, has been developed in response to the recognition that we are in real peril when decision makers and others do not have time for, and are unpracticed in the power of, contemplation. This organization, among others, fosters the opening of new pathways for contemplative practice in a wide range of contexts where young adults are ripe for learning the power of pause, in undergraduate education, in professional schools, and even in prisons.

Pause is powerful for young adults because it encourages cultivation of the inner life, honors the emerging inner authority of the young adult, and activates the awareness that he or she participates in the motion of life that transcends one's own efforts to manage and control, a reality larger

than the scope of one's ego. The place of pause in the process of imagination is the place where each of us must go with the apparently irreconcilable tensions that constitute life's biggest questions. Initiation into the power of pause at once strengthens and chastens the imagination of the young adult and can be one of the greatest gifts of a mentoring environment.

Worthy Dreams

Powerful dialogues with otherness, critical and connective thought, and the practice of contemplation can yield the gift of a worthy dream. A worthy dream is an imagination of self as adult in a world that honors the potential of the young adult soul. Daniel Levinson was the first developmental theorist to recognize the power of the Dream, and that the "novice" phase of adulthood is the crucial time for forming a Dream for one's life. With Judy Levinson, he recently contended that the most crucial function of a mentoring relationship is to develop and articulate the dream.²¹

The Dream, with a capital D, is something more than night dreams, casual daydreams, pure fantasy, or a fully designed plan. This Dream has a quality of vision.²² It is an imagined possibility that orients meaning, purpose, and aspiration. The formation of a worthy Dream is the critical task of young adult faith.

A REACH FOR THE IDEAL. Dreams come in all shapes and sizes, from conventional to radical. But the Dreams that most profoundly serve the composing of a faith to live by stem for the most part from a particular capacity of the young adult: the capacity to envision the ideal.

Because the threshold of young adulthood is marked by the emergence of critical thought, young adults have the ability to critique self and world and also to imagine how it might become. Thus, although young adults are often accused of youthful idealism, we might better understand young adulthood as the birthplace of adult vision.

The young adult has struggled to push away from the safe but constricting harbor of conventional knowing in order to achieve an initial sense of self-aware integrity. On the other hand, the young adult is not yet embedded in the full range of adult commitments. These circumstances create a certain freedom, and a unique capacity to critically conceptualize the ideal. By *ideal* the young adult means that which is pure, consistent, authentic, and congruent. The young adult's search for the ideal is a potent element in the search for what will most adequately ground and orient the integrity, commitment, and investment of the emerging self.

Carol Gilligan's classic analysis of students who took Kohlberg's course on moral and political choice elegantly captures conditions that give rise to the quest for the ideal.²³ Among those she studied were students who seemed to be dealing seriously with real experience, such as starvation in Biafra, competing obligations, and the reality of human pain and suffering. Wrestling with the complexity of reality seemed to have the power to undo the most principled moral understanding.²⁴ Students questioned the principles in their practical construction, that is, in their application to the reality of the actual moral dilemma, to what one student called "the dilemma of the fact."²⁵ According to Gilligan, "the assumption of 'all other things being equal' tangled with the awareness that in reality they never were."²⁶ As a consequence, these students came to see that "reason had outstripped morality, as Kant and Dostoevski had seen, and, in the absence of knowledge, moral judgment became a matter not of logic but of faith."²⁷

One student Gilligan described experienced a period of extreme relativism, beginning at the end of his sophomore year in college, when he "came to" the conclusion that "morality was by and large, a lot of bunk, that there were no right or wrong answers whatsoever." This had marked for him the end of "huge theoretical moral constructs and systems."²⁸ (We might say that this marked the shipwreck of the hopeful assumption that the logic of Authority could lead to certainty.) "He now believed that 'what we think is very much a part of how we live' and that in detaching thought from life he had been 'building a castle in the air.' Still the moral problem remains, . . . because 'human beings come in contact with each other's lives.' Moral values are human constructions, conventions of thought that inevitably are tied to the conditions in which people live and in which they must act."²⁹

The voice of the student continues in the search for the ideal:

A truly moral experience, if there is such a thing, [would be] relating to any person one comes across, not as a means, but as an end in himself and essentially as a human being and nothing more and nothing less, not as my client, not as my waiter. When one is "beyond good and evil," you talk about human beings vis-à-vis other human beings rather than talking about right or wrong. . . . I guess to me the *ideal* societal situation is where everybody related to everybody like that and did not worry about right or wrong, because then moral dilemmas might not exist or might not arise.

Gilligan observes that though the students' ideologies ranged from the New Left to the New Right, the quality of the ideal laced through the

various moral postures. Gilligan poignantly noted: "When the injustices of conventional morality were apparent and there seemed no alternative way to judge, . . . then the flexibility of . . . thought made anything seem possible. Given a morality that appeared both absurd and hypocritical, a matter more of rationalization than of reason, [for a few] hedonism returned as at least an 'authentic' basis for choice."³⁰

This observation alerts us to the sobering fact that once the young person has seen relativism and seeks a new integrity in which to stand, even hedonism or a comparable variant may appear as a viable faith. In other words, whatever content (or ideology) appears to be at least consistent and authentic may appear to fit the young adult's hunger for the ideal, so long as it is liberated from the "hypocrisy" of the conventional (and the inconsistent).

Gilligan also observed, however, that those students most able to develop a capacity to grapple effectively and responsibly with moral issues seemed to be those "whose concept of morality . . . entailed an 'obligation to relieve human misery and suffering if possible.'"³¹ This sense of obligation arises from recognizing the connections among things; it can give rise, in turn, to a sense of vocation.

VOCATION. Note that the Dream understood through the eyes of the great traditions of faith across time is more than imagining a job or career or profession narrowly understood. The Dream in its fullest and most spiritual sense is a sense of vocation. *Vocation* conveys "calling" and meaningful purpose. It is a relational sensibility in which I recognize that what I do with my time, talents, and treasure is most meaningfully conceived not as a matter of mere personal passion and preference but in relationship to the whole of life. Vocation arises from a deepening understanding of both self and world, which gives rise to moments of power when self and purpose become aligned with eternity. Vocation is the place where the heart's deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger.³²

Access to Images

Forming a worthy dream depends, in significant measure, on access to fitting, vital images. There are types of images that are especially important in the formation of young adult faith. Mentoring communities gift the imagination of the young adult with images of truth, transformation, positive images of self and of the other, and images of interrelatedness.

IMAGES OF TRUTH: A WORLD OF SUFFERING AND WONDER. Forming a viable faith depends upon serious engagement with the truth of the world, the universe as it is, including "things that should not be so."

This means that though we can never fully comprehend Truth, the young adult may learn to apprehend something of the wholeness of life—the infinite complexity of the social and more-than-human world in the dimensions of both suffering and wonder.

It is not surprising that one of the most ancient and venerable stories about the formation of human faith concerns a young person who went into a wider world and discovered the realities of suffering. Just as the Buddha came to grapple with suffering as a feature of enlightenment, any adult faith must do the same in some form. Young adulthood can be a time of coming to terms with suffering, often one's own and sometimes that of others who suffer far more than the young adult may heretofore have imagined.³⁴ As the quest for truth sharpens, young adults grow increasingly vulnerable to a raw awareness of the stark and tragic dimensions of suffering. The injustice of some forms of suffering and the pervasiveness of suffering as a primary feature of the fabric of life itself are among the irreducible facts of life that mature faith must be able to embrace.

The paradox is that as integral to life as suffering is, it is matched by wonder. By wonder I mean the awe and gratitude invoked in those moments when we come alive to the intricate luminosity, beauty, power, and vast grandeur of the universe (or some tiny part of it) and the amazement we feel that we are in any measure privileged to behold it. By wonder I mean also the sense of Mystery that cannot be exhausted even by our most magnificent forms of knowing, including the awe-full ambiguity that arises from any reasonable assessment of the complex, dynamic, and confounding character of life. Young adults have a readiness for soaking up such wonder, especially if it is distinguished from the various forms of artificial high that exploit this readiness. This dimension of wonder, too, is a fact that any worthy faith must be able to enfold.

Ironically, contemporary life also offers a good many ways to be insulated from truth—both the scope of suffering and the opportunities for wonder. A good mentoring environment, however, provides an initiation into both. When the young adult is invited into both suffering and wonder, then contradiction and dissonance proliferate, raising big questions and activating the imagination in its search for meaning and faith. I recall how Joan Baez once said, "I do not know whether it is worse to bring a child into this world and submit him or her to the disease we call society, or to refuse to bring a child into this world and thus rob him or her of one glorious red sunset." If young adults are steeped in images that grasp both the suffering and wonder of their time, they may gain faith that can be sustained because it cannot be in a certain sense surprised. A great mentoring environment skirts neither suffering nor wonder; rather, it holds them in a dynamic paradox.

IMAGES OF TRANSFORMATION: HOPE FOR RENEWING THE WORLD. Suffering and wonder, faithfully conceived, appear to be disparate, if not, opposing realities. They are resolved in the human soul only in the sensibility we call hope. Authentic hope is no mere bromide. It is grounded in the facts of things as they are, taking into account all that is known and unknown. If young adults have learned in some measure the nature and scope of suffering and wonder, the images that capture their imagination promise a fitting embrace of the heights and depths of the human condition and are in this sense ideal.

Therefore, if young adults are to be initiated into a conversation with truth that leads toward mature adult faith, they must be offered images dynamic enough to grasp the complex and composing character of the motion of life and its transformations. Young adults must be met in their dialogue with promise: the dialogue between despair and hope, shipwreck and gladness, bondage and freedom, death and life, stasis and the incessant transformation of all things. Accordingly, mentors serve well when giving access to an imaginal complex of integrating symbols that grasp the dynamic of dissolution and recomposition. A recognition of the finite nature of all constructions of knowledge *and* the possibility of their ongoing reconstruction toward more adequate knowing is a crucial feature of the initiation of young adults into an adult knowing that fosters hope. This dynamic may be revealed in a wide range of contexts.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a noted Roman Catholic theologian, recounts her discovery of this central dynamic through the teaching of Robert Palmer, a classicist:

Palmer was . . . more than faintly contemptuous of Christianity. . . . [It was] Palmer, the believing pagan, who first taught me to think theologically or, as he would have called it, "mythopoetically." Through him I discovered the meaning of religious symbols, not as intrinsic doctrines, but as living metaphors of human existence. I still remember the great excitement I felt in freshman Humanities when he said something that made me realize that "death and resurrection" was not some peculiar statement about something that was supposed to have happened to someone 2,000 years ago, with no particular connection to anyone else's life. Rather it was a metaphor for inner transformation and rebirth, the mystery of renewed life. He happened to be talking about Attis or Dionysos, not about Jesus. For the first time I understood a new orientation to Christian symbols that eleven years of Catholic education had never suggested to me. That was the beginning of my being interested in religious ideas in a new way.³⁵

If young adults discover this dynamic of dissolution and recomposition at the core of life, they become attuned to the motion at the heart of the universe and the activity of spirit and Spirit, which may be expressed in religious/spiritual or secular terms.

POSITIVE IMAGES OF SELF. Forming a worthy dream also depends on access to positive images of self linked with a compelling sense of possibility and aspiration.³⁶ Although this can happen through awards and grades, it is most profound when the young adult is affirmed in ways that convey a faithful correspondence between his or her own aspirations and positive reflection in the eyes of another whom the young adult values and trusts. This is the power of confirmation that mentoring communities hold.

Reminding us that mentoring can be practiced by those who are still young adults themselves, a young Kenyan, Moses, tells a story. After completing a Jesuit education in Kenya, he came to the United States for study in a small college. Unprepared for the racism in this culture, he came close to despair and almost shut down as a way of coping. Then a Caucasian American student whom he admired, Krista, only slightly older than himself, said to him one day, "It isn't your problem that they have a problem with you, it's their problem." It was a turning point. It was an insight that made sense of his experience, and it suggested an alternative, positive image of himself. In time, he became the first international student to be elected as student body president in that college, and today he is in graduate school, preparing himself for religious leadership.

Young adults hunger for images of self that promise authenticity and a mix of competence, excellence, and the finest qualities of life, without minimizing the struggle inherent in claiming these qualities, a struggle of which the young adult now has the capacity to be acutely aware. One young woman reflected:

I had one really terrific coach. He was my coach for track. He was much more interested in personal bests and the effort produced than actual placings. I wanted to train really hard to prove to myself and to him what I was capable of. This desire came out of a set of personal goals rather than feeling overpressured from him. He helped me keep the goals realistic and always provided positive feedback. After both years of track season, there were other athletes that set outstanding records. I accomplished good performances and was above average but did not have these same outstanding overall results. And yet, after both seasons, I was the one awarded the female track MVP by my track coach, based on the personal achievements, extensive improvements,

and intensive training and effort that I had put in on a daily basis. The qualities and characteristics he most respected in an athlete were ones that he suggested through his attitude and words, that I had developed to a fair extent, and many of those qualities were further strengthened in me because of his apparent respect for such characteristics.

Images of self that encourage high aspiration and excellence in meaningful terms (in contrast to mere success) enable the young adult to see beyond self and world as they presently are and to discern a vision of the potential of life: the world as it ought to be and the self as it might become.

IMAGES OF THE OTHER AS BOTH SIMILAR AND UNIQUE. In the search for a knowing of oneself that can be meaningfully sustained, our images of the other make an enormous difference. How we construe the other is an elemental ingredient in composing self and world and in the formation of faith: who and what we trust, who *we* are and who *they* are, and what we consider worth our time and trouble. Richard R. Niebuhr has suggested that a key element of the reflective activity by which we participate in the moral society of conscious life is the awareness that as selves we are a synthesis of other and "same"—"a living synthesis of opposites." He writes: "There can be no I without a You, no You without an I, and no I and You without a He, She, They and Those. We cannot become *one* in the sense that *persons* are *one* without also becoming manifold, without also becoming, as it were, the other life-forms that sustain us. It is a *moral* process of apprehending and striving to comprehend, of going forth and returning, expanding and contracting as the heart does, a process of diastolic and systolic development."³⁷

This synthesis of opposites is dependent upon images that fittingly name the other in ways that in turn will more fittingly define the self. For example, a young African American who had grown up in an suburb of a major American midwestern city recalled that through his high school years he assumed that any young person of color in this society who worked hard could have the same access to the privileges and comforts of upper-middle-class society that he had. It was not until he was in college and began to tutor a young African American boy in the inner city that he had his first conscious encounter with otherness. He discovered that without the same resources and encouragement that he had known, it would be much more difficult than he presumed. As the living image of the young boy in the inner city took up lodging in his imagination, he had to recompose both self and other, becoming a different I because of a

reconfigured You. This deepening of the relationship between self and other, self and world, forms the double-strand helix of the DNA in the seed of vocation.

IMAGES OF INTERRELATEDNESS AND WHOLENESS: INSTITUTIONS THAT WORK. The faithful moral imagination is increasingly dependent upon recognizing the interrelatedness of all of creation. As we emerge into a more profound ecological and global consciousness spurred in part by new technologies that daily destroy any illusion that our actions in one place do not have unexpected consequences everywhere else, we can feel overwhelmed and powerless. We have discovered, however, that consciousness of "our small part" can become a positive source of power and confidence if that part is seen as participating in, and thus affecting, the larger whole. Thus the search for right images in our time needs to include images that enable us to grasp an intuitive sense of the whole, in ways that link the particular and the universal, holding each accountable to the other.³⁸

In their appropriate dependence upon the images available to them in their environment, young adults are vulnerable to partialities. By confusing a part with the whole, they may move toward a faith that consequently works "here" but not "there." One young adult commented: "You have to remember that I have lived in a different environment every year for six years. So have most people I know. Nothing is stable and we switch between worlds all the time. We go from having money to being broke to having money again, from being surrounded by friends to being lonely to having friends again in a matter of a few months. Those kinds of major transitions would make anyone refigure the way they think about the world, especially if they are already grappling with issues of identity, career, life-goals, etc."

Access to images, symbols, stories, insights, and theories that create durable, widening, and open-ended patterns, systems, and networks of connection and meaning enlarge the mind and expand the heart. They enable young adults to compose and anchor an increasingly trustworthy faith that, in spite of immediate circumstances, makes it possible to become at home in the universe.

Organizations and institutions that can serve as images of a meaningful wholeness and interrelatedness are the soil in which the seed of vocation may grow. Young adults seek places where they can roll up their sleeves and pitch in. In today's complex societies, big questions are likely to spawn worthy dreams that require working closely and cooperatively with many others. Increasingly, the world's deep hungers can only be adequately met

with the collective wisdom and passion of a host of inspired hearts and minds. Thus, young adults depend on finding meaningful places within organizations and institutions, places where they can contribute their part as an element of a larger effort than the self alone can achieve.

In reflecting on the formation of people who can sustain commitment to the common good, we have come to believe that most had the opportunity during their formative years to be part of some workable, effective institution. Participating in an organization that successfully enacts a worthy purpose gives flesh to the intuition that one is part of a larger and meaningful whole—and that one's own power is amplified when set in resonance with that of others who seek a common goal. This sensibility is at risk if cynicism regarding virtually every form of institutional life abounds. Yet almost every organization has the opportunity, as a mentoring environment, to gift the young adult imagination with an experience of an organization that works. Though the young adult may not find the same again, the conviction takes root that it is possible to take on ambitious dreams in a complex, interdependent world. Given such an experience, one learns the power of participation in something larger than oneself and knows that viable modes of shared action can be effective and transforming.

As institutions that work, mentoring communities embody possibility—a gift to the young adult imagination. A primary form of this embodiment is found in practices that serve the formation of faith.



Communities of Practice

Mentoring environments are communities of imagination *and practice*. Humanizing practices, as we use the term here, are ways of life, things that people do with and for each other to make and keep life human.³⁹ Among the many that might be identified as important to forming meaning, purpose, and faith in the young adult years, there are three in particular that all mentoring environments might strategically recover to serve the formation of young adult faith: the practices of hearth, table, and commons.

THE PRACTICE OF HEARTH. Hearth places have the power to draw and hold us, for they are places of equilibrium offering an exquisite balance of stability and motion. Hearth places are where we are warmed in both body and soul, are made comfortable, and tend to linger. Indoors or out, hearth places invite pause, reflection, and conversation: the ocean shore, a wooded sanctuary, a bench set amidst an active park or plaza. These are places for lingering.

Hearth places invite reflection within and among. As we have seen, young adult faith is forged in an ongoing dialogue that occurs both within the self and among an available network of belonging in interaction with the wider world. The dialogue of which we speak—for example, between power and powerlessness, success and failure, alienation and belonging, right and wrong, despair and hope—cannot usually be accomplished in fleeting sound bites. It requires something more like a hearthside conversation.

Dialogue does not mean two people talking, but rather “talking through.” Time and places for talking through are essential in forming critically aware, inner-dependent, and worthily committed faith. An understanding of the courage and costs in the formation of young adult faith asks educators and their institutions to acknowledge in their everyday practices that when truth is being recomposed in the most comprehensive dimensions of self, world, and “God,” then necessarily the soul suffers disequilibrium in the service of a larger, more adequate knowing. If a new equilibrium is to take form, there must be ways of being that are consistently present in the environment to support and nourish a new imagination.

Young adult shipwreck and the search for a new shore occur often in inconvenient, untimely forms: trauma in a romantic relationship, raising fundamental questions about the nature and worthiness of the self; a tumble into issues of social justice, disordering one’s notions of the character of the world; an unwanted pregnancy, a divorce, or a death that shatters expectations of both past and future; or an encounter with “the books,” leading to an intellectual impasse that swamps an earlier faith and its hope, replacing them with a sense of futility that no lecture can cure but that an afternoon with a mentoring professor might comfort and inform. These are hearth-sized conversations.

In some colleges, business settings, and elsewhere, one can still find vestiges of the traditional hearthside. Interestingly, they are reappearing in some new educational and corporate structures, though often in rather cold forms designed more to create an elegant ambiance than to invite lingering conversation. Students do not want simply more office hours. Coworkers and colleagues do not want an appointment. There is a hunger, however, for hearth and for conversation that begins as it happens and concludes whenever.

The practice of the hearth place can be recovered in a variety of forms and throughout a wide range of organizations and institutions. We know the difference between offices and homes that are at least sometimes willing to run on hearth time, and those that cannot or will not. Mentoring environments find a way to practice hearth time.

THE PRACTICE OF THE TABLE. It has been said that the table is a place where you know there will be a place for you, where what is on the table will be shared, and where you will be placed under obligation. In every culture, human beings have eaten together. The practice of the table prepares us for *civitas*. In the practice of the table we learn to share, to wait, to accommodate, to be grateful. The table is emblematic of economic, political, and spiritual realities. At the table, we learn delayed gratification, belonging, commitment, and ritual. Table is another kind of hearth place; likewise, it is a place where we may share conversation and become practiced in dialogue. It has served many as a place for learning how we can disagree yet remain deeply aware of our common bonds.

In an overindividualized, consumerist culture, however, the microwave oven easily becomes a primary saboteur of the family dinner, ensuring warm food for all whether or not they are home for dinner "on time." We are not only consumers of "fast food," but there are "stand-up gourmet restaurants" in which people eat sophisticated cuisine on the run and alone. The typical cafeteria design serving young adults in schools or workplaces focuses more on infinite individual options than upon arrangements and aesthetics that encourage shared, lingering conversation. The practice of the table shrinks under the pressures of efficiencies and choice.

Yet we hunger; yet we eat. Young adults are drawn to those places that nourish them: places that in very practical terms recognize that the body, the heart, and the intellect are intimately interrelated and the whole is nourished. Because today's young adults have in many cases not had the practice of the table, there is a good deal at stake in whether or not mentoring communities incorporate a table practice as an elemental feature of common life.

It has been said also that a group has become a community when someone brings food to the meeting. The practice of the table may play a significant role in preparing faithful adults who can impart leadership in reweaving a civil and flourishing society. The practice of the table foreshadows the practice of the commons.

THE PRACTICE OF THE COMMONS. Just as the table serves as a micro expression of *civitas*, so does the practice of the commons. The commons, as we discussed in Chapter One, is the image that stands behind the concept of the common good. It is a place where people meet by happenstance and intention and have a sense of a shared, interdependent life within a manageable frame. The commons affords practices of interrelatedness, belonging, and learning how to stand—and stand with—each other over time.

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Many organizations and communities have a commons: the common room, the quad, the lunch place, the volleyball court, the park, the place of shared meditation or worship. Whether the commons is inside or out, an active practice of the commons can bring together in fruitful tension and celebration the disparate elements of the community. It is a place within which to confirm a common, connected life, and in combination with various forms of story and ritual it can become the center of shared faith and grounded hope. A practice of the commons sets at the heart's core an imagination of *we* and weaves a way of life that conveys meaning and orients purpose and commitment.

When parking lots create a centrifugal pull away from the center, when there is no common time for gathering, when common space is shaped exclusively by commercial interests (as in a shopping mall), the commons ceases to serve as an integral image of community and becomes fragmented into special and parochial interests, used only serially by various tribes, if at all. Young adults become vulnerable to dreams that represent only the interest of self and tribe rather than building Dreams that embrace and serve a wider life.

I am persuaded that if young adults are going to become at home in the universe in ways that prepare them for citizenship on what has now become a global commons, they need to be grounded in faith shaped, in part, by a micro experience of the commons—an embodied image and practice that nourishes an imagination of the possibility of shared participation in creating the common good. As faith is the place of experience and the imagination, the lived practice of hearth, table, and commons is a threefold gift by which a mentoring environment may nourish the young adult imagination of faith in a changing, complex, and diverse world.

Gaston Bachelard has written that the chief function of the house is to protect the dreamer.⁴⁰ It is the purpose of mentoring environments to provide a place within which young adults may discover themselves becoming more at home in the universe. Through many means, including the practices of hearth, table, and commons, mentoring environments create a context of recognition, support, challenge, and inspiration. They foster dialogue, critical and connective thought, and initiation into the power of the contemplative life. As networks of belonging, they convey the promise of a sociality within which big questions may be asked and worthy Dreams may be formed. Mentoring environments are communities of imagination that distinctively serve young adult meaning-making and the formation of vocation and faith.