



Reading Your Life's Story: An Invitation to Spiritual Mentoring
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“Spiritual mentoring is not a complicated process requiring technical training and complex protocol,” Keith Anderson writes. “It is essential, authentic, and maybe even natural human speech that is focused, disciplined, and nurtured by training for one of the hardest things we do: listening reflectively to another.”

These pages unfold a vision for mentoring that invites us to read our own lives as narrative and to learn how to enter the narrative of another life.

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Spiritual Mentoring as a Holy Vocation

Reading story as holy narrative is a nuanced metaphor for the richness, individuality, and complexity of a person. It is a sacred task to be done carefully, respectfully, and in holy curiosity. It is reading with a consecrated purpose.

My Life as a House is the story of a man who is dying of cancer, but only he knows his diagnosis. I’ve seen the movie at least a half dozen times. It draws me in by its plot but more, I suppose, by the emotions it evokes in me. He is divorced from his wife and estranged from his self-loathing and rebellious teenage son, who considers his father a relic of something long since forgotten. He owns a piece of property that overlooks the California coast that once contained a ramshackle house built by his own father. Fired by his architectural company, in a rage he destroys all of the architectural models he has created over his career but keeps the design of a house he once crafted. In an act of undetermined motivation he decides to build a new house based on the one remaining model to replace the house his father had built years before.

After his death there is a voice-over in which the architect, George, speaks to his son about his life and house. “I always thought of myself as a house. I was always what I lived in. It didn’t need to be big; it didn’t even need to be beautiful; it just needed to be mine. I became what I was meant to be. I built myself a life. . . . I built myself a house.” Building a house was the plot for the father, George (Kevin Kline), to read the final chapter of his own unfolding story.

We live in what we have built. The stories of our life become a house we inhabit with its limitations, eccentricities, mistakes, hidden meanings, and crafted beauty. In this book I hope to offer ways to help us all read the story of our life through the centuries-deep practice of spiritual mentoring. Stories are a way to find coherence and meaning in what seems random, episodic, or even chaotic. Alan Jones’s words are irrepressibly stunning: “My drifting is consecrated in pilgrimage.”

“Passion for pilgrimage,” the title of Jones’s book, is one way to describe our human longing for meaning. What the spiritual teachers of my life share in common, along with generations of others named and anonymous, is that they practiced spiritual friendship on a common quest for identity, community, and purpose. Spiritual mentoring is not a form of evangelism, catechism, or pastoral care, per se; it is an embodiment of spiritual companionship. The mentor chooses to walk alongside another in what Celtic spirituality calls *anamchara* — soul friendship — seeking to find meaning on the journey. It may be as simple as two friends who

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Anderson was director of Vocare, a program for theological exploration of vocation funded by a \$2 million grant from the Lilly Endowment, and has been the Senior Fellow for Spiritual Formation for the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities since 2000.

share a common hunger for faith who know they need companions for the journey. It is enriched by centuries of wisdom distilled from spiritual directors, monastics, clergy, priests, and very ordinary women and men who reached out to another to sit at the table of spiritual nurture in this ministry of reading the story of each other's lives. It is the recognition that I can be helped through the wisdom of one who has climbed this mountain trail before and is willing to sit by the fire and tell the stories of their own trek across terrain I now will walk. The book that will be read is the life story of the mentee.

Mentors are, most often, people we know who live alongside us as companions of the sacred in the most ordinary ways. Pilgrimage is a metaphor that speaks of an earlier era or a dramatic spiritual quest. Lacy Ellman is a spiritual director who once was a student of mine. She says:

Though ancient in its roots, the practice of pilgrimage is alive and well today, beckoning a new generation of seekers to journey beyond the edge of daily life into terrains of mystery, wonder, revelation, delight, acceptance and transformation. But you don't have to leave home to begin living like a pilgrim. To live as a pilgrim at home, all you need to do is to see your life as a journey and your role as a seeker of the Sacred.

Yesterday two men spoke to me at a conference with eyes glistening with joy. "You know our best friend, PJ." They were correct. I knew PJ as a student with whom I was privileged to spend time frequently over his college career. "You gave him tenderness as a new follower of Jesus." That same day a woman at the conference said, "You know my pastor. She was your student." I knew immediately who she was. In both cases I lit up with anticipation to hear about their work and ministry. I was humbled to be remembered by PJ and Georgia after so many years. I tell these stories to say it is an immense privilege to be asked to walk alongside a mentee. But I remember the gift of relationship with them both. Their stories are as different as can be, but the common thread was intentional time spent learning to read each story. It is a holy vocation, this calling to mentor another. The privilege is not to be taken for granted.

— Taken from chapter one, "Reading with a Consecrated Purpose"