



# Finding Good Mentors

BY JOHN DESAULNIERS

*"...of course, parents are not the only ones raising their children. They are being raised also by their schools and by their friends and by the parents of their friends. Some of this outside raising is good, some is not. It is, anyhow, unavoidable."*

*(Wendell Berry, "Family Work" The Gift of the Good Land, 1981)*

I came across this quote the other day and thought it profoundly appropriate for an article on mentoring. This quote was in a larger piece by another writer whom I appreciate, but it captured my attention because it was Wendell Berry. Not that I'm particularly familiar with Berry or a fan of his, at least not yet.

Several months ago I was on the East Coast visiting my aging father. The house he and my stepmother shared for years was being sold, and the tangibles of furniture, framed art, and so on that would not follow my now-widowed father to the nursing home were being dispensed to family, friends, and charities. This specific visit was for me to go through his library and select the books I wanted to ship back to add to mine. Among the wide range of books I browsed was one of selected poems of Wendell Berry. Because my dad liked him, I wanted to read him to better know my dad.

It's informal, but what occurred in that small experience was just that which we are discussing: mentoring. In this case, it was my father who mentored me, introducing Wendell Berry to me by passive example so that when a poignant quote was put in front of me I would be more attuned to the author's name. In most cases, however, mentoring, by historic context, is not done by parents but by others. Mentor was a character in Homer's writings. And when Odysseus went on his decades-long journey, it was his trusted friend named Mentor who raised and trained Odysseus's son.

Mentoring will happen to our children no matter what. As Berry said, some will be good, some will not be good, but it is unavoidable. But when we are intentional as parents, we can minimize the not good and maximize the good.

I started thinking back through my life to consider who my men-

tors were. I have to admit that I can't think of one that my father intentionally set in front of me to learn from, though he strongly encouraged reading. And there are authors that I notice as ones he would recommend and the occasional ones he would specifically not recommend. I suppose books have been the mentors my father pointed me to. And those who know me would not be in the least surprised.

But I can't say I've had any formal mentors except for two. One summer, when I worked for friends who owned an auto parts store, the father and grandfather who owned it took me under their wings. While the formal aspects lasted only for a summer, I am still grateful – even more grateful now – for the time, money, and energy they invested in me. The other was the older brother of a college classmate of mine when I pastored my first church. He, too, was a pastor nearby. And he made it his kind and encouraging business to check up on me and give me both counsel and opportunities under the guidance of a more seasoned minister. My first pastorate was not easy, but he eased the challenges that face any first-time pastor by being to me what he was to my classmate – a big brother.

I thought then of who I might have given to my children as mentors or whom they might have chosen. I think the first that each of my four children would identify would be their piano teacher. She was (and is) exceptional, as far as we are concerned, in her ability to relate to children without pandering to them. Each of our children have become very proficient: all participated in the Bill Riley State Fair Competition, all have performed for events, and three are actively involved in their respective churches' music ministries.

But what their teacher taught them was more than that. It was a love and appreciation for music in its fullness. Her passion transferred to each of them in different ways, but I still see her "fingerprints," especially when my children are together and discussing music. I have always loved music and shared that love with my children, but their piano teacher infused something more.

A second mentor I can think of was my younger son's basketball coach, who not only mentored him but all the young men in the