

ARE YOU A MENTOR?

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
Horace Mann Sunday, May 2, 2010
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Whenever we honor public school teachers I am tempted to start by saying that it was my own experience as one of them, for one year, straight out of college, that first drove me to religion!

Here's where religion got me: It was our first day in New Orleans I was with a group our teens at a community center in the Lower Ninth Ward. It's called the Blair Grocery, after the African American family that once owned the building, raised their eight children there, and ran a small neighborhood store. But now it's really an educational project. Started by a charismatic teacher from New York City named Nat Turner, it aims tries to engage local urban youth, who've been virtually abandoned by institutions, like the public school system –in learning, in micro-farming, in environmental justice work, and youth empowerment.

You see, the Lower 9th, once made up of homes owned by working class African Americans for generations, now is a semi-desert. On most blocks, only two or three houses have been restored and re-occupied. Most empty, boarded up, nearly five years after the federal levees gave way. Others have been razed. Empty lots un-mowed subject their owners to losing the land to the city.

Some struggling families held on. When officials told them to wait several years for the local elementary school to be fixed, they just moved in, and began the work. It's now thriving again, anchoring the area. But there is no high school any more, on the downriver side of the infamous Industrial Canal, where the levees broke. If you are a teenager there, you have to catch a school **bus at 5 am to get to school**. No wonder the drop –out rate, and the rate of youth in trouble with the law, is among the highest in the country.

While we learned from from one young staff member at Blair to make compost for community gardens -- using produce discarded by a Whole Foods grocery, wood chips, and “black earth – part of me overheard a conversation between another staffer and a young black man of about 15. “I don't need no damned mentor!” I heard him say. “What I want? I'm gonna die young anyhow.

‘fore I do, I just want my homies to know I was *bad*, man.” The staffer responded in a soft voice. I couldn’t hear. But hung in there with the would be “bad” guy, quietly, persistently, for hours. . . Whether he made any progress, I couldn’t tell. By lunch break both were no longer to be seen.

Mentoring. Long before it a cliché in corporate America, used as a verb, as though one being mentored could be called a “mentee,” (Ick! a term that makes me cringe) *mentor* was not just a noun, but a name -- a character in the secular scripture of ancient Greece. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, when Ulysses leaves Ithaka and goes off to war, leaving behind his wife Penelope and his young son, Telemachus, he puts the care of the latter in the hands of a wise elder -- named Mentor.

I don’t mean to be pedantic here. But I’m reminded that when Julia Ward Howe, a good friend of Horace Mann, was approached for advice by a much younger woman, she replied, “*Study Greek, my dear! It’s better than a diamond necklace.*” When I was in Divinity School, 40 years ago no, I was lucky enough to do just that; and then to use it, not just to learn to read the New Testament, but also to take a seminar with the great poet and translator of Homer, Robert Fitzgerald, doing a paper for him on Telemachus and Mentor.

Even then I must have been aware of how fortunate I was as a young adult in my teachers and mentors. My own father had never been to college. Yet I was privileged to learn from Jesuits in Italy, psychologists like Erik Erikson at Harvard, African American UU educators like the late John Ertha, and women ministers like Barbara Hollerorth. I could go on. When I insisted, on coming here as your minister, that you allow me to help mentor the next generation of UU ministers in Sarah, Lucas Hergert, now leading a congregation in California, and Molly – I was conscious of this not only as personal “pay back,” but as a process we UUs hold dear.

It’s not just a matter of Elijah placing a mantle on Elisha, or John the Baptist calling down the Spirit on one greater than himself. It’s often far less acknowledged or formal than all of that.

Horace Mann was born May 4, 1796: which is why I have declared the first Sunday in May “Horace Mann Sunday.” When he was boy out in Franklin, MA, his older brother tragically broke threw the ice while skating one winter Sunday afternoon; and was promptly consigned straight to hell by the local Calvinist minister at the graveside.

Horace was taken under wing by a local teacher, became a universalist, rejecting the idea that a god of love could send people like his brother to eternal torment, and then, unable to pay the fees to go to secondary school, read everything in the Franklin Free Public Library – until he won a scholarship to Brown. Where the President not only took over mentoring young Mann, but even walked his daughter Charlotte down the aisle to marry Horace.

By then Mann was a young lawyer in nearby Dedham; elected to the legislature to represent this town, among others. But when Charlotte who had TB, the endemic disease of that era, soon died, Mann was despondent. Boston friends like Elizabeth Peabody and Julia Ward Howe advised him to come hear the great Unitarian preacher, William Ellery Channing.

the great Unitarian preacher. Through those circles, Mann met not only great women like Howe, and Elizabeth Peabody, but also her sister Mary. He became a living advocate of the Channing's idea that the goal of religious life to fully unfold one's own spiritual gifts, for compassion, learning, and leadership – and then help others to develop theirs. He gave up a career as a politician that could have made him governor, or a US senator, to lead the effort to make free public education accessible to every child, first in Massachusetts, and then elsewhere. He also started the first school for training teachers – on the site of what is now the Unitarian Church in West Newton, where Cheryl is a member, and where there's a Horace Mann window some may remember for our service there a few years ago.

For the last three years, that congregation and this one have been providing volunteers to the William Ellery Channing School in Hyde Park – a K to 5 public school where we have helped especially with children who have no one at home to assist with English language acquisition. We've helped non-readers become readers. Scores have gone up. Teachers have been grateful. That project has now come to an end, for a whole variety of reasons. But we may well seek out other settings in which we can help mentor and tutor urban youth. I think of our own Ruth Kolbe, who has done that for years, tutoring a young woman she met through the UU Urban Ministry's Roxbury Youth Program. Daquana Harper is now graduating from high school, and has won a

full scholarship to Bucknell College in a program that provides lots of peer support from other students of a similar background.

To be or have a mentor often implies a conscious, agreed upon relationship, often between someone older or at least more experienced in a field, and someone just starting out. Duration may vary. Some relationships are short term. Others extend over years. But it occurred to me while in New Orleans that many of us are mentors without even knowing it.

It was later in the week. We had been working in a community garden on the west bank of the Mississippi – in a quaint, historic neighborhood called Algiers – and area that suffered little damage from Katrina. We were helping out Mr. Anthony Lee, a man about my age, a volunteer with the Common Ground Health Center. How did he get involved in the Center, or with the community garden? Well, after Katrina, his wife had a stroke. He himself sought treatment for high blood pressure. They both began to realize that their diet had been poor; that there were few fresh vegetables in the stores where they shopped; that, despite the richness of the river bottom soil, much of it was toxic, from chemical plants and refineries upstream near Baton Rouge. He'd started this garden, along with ten other households – raised beds with good composted soil, perhaps from the Blair Grocery. Then his back went out. Two of the women involved had just had babies and couldn't do their weeding either. So we mowed, and wacked weeds around the perimeter, and weeded between the growing lettuce, squash, eggplants, tomatoes, herbs and other vegetables. Over lunch Mr. Lee kept telling our teens what he'd learned too late about eating healthy. Later that night I found myself talking with a few of the teens about work they had done with younger children, in summer camps and similar programs. "You gotta do it all by example," one of them said. "You got that right," I replied.

It made me think of a passage in the journals of the Swiss spiritual writer, Henri Amiel. "Every life is a profession of faith," he wrote, "and exercises an inevitable and silent propaganda. As far as lies in its power, it tends to transform the universe and humanity into its own image. Thus we all have a cure of souls. Every man [and woman] is a centre of perpetual radiation like a luminous body . . . a beacon, as it were, which entices a ship upon the rocks if it does not guide it into port. Every [one] is a priest, even involuntarily; his [or her] conduct an unspoken sermon,

which is forever preaching to others. But there are priests of Baal, of Moloch, and of all the false gods. Such is the high importance of example.”

Are you a mentor? Yes, you are -- whoever you are, and whether you know it or do it consciously or not. Even our own youth realize that. Therefore let us mind our words and lives, and conduct them not for our own sake alone, but, in service to the highest aspirations of the human spirit, help others to unfold the full strength of their own potential, for compassion, wisdom, and commitment to the common good. So may it be. Amen.

*Hymn 124

Be That Guide

Seaburg/ Benjamin

Be that guide whom love sustains. Rise above the daily strife:
Lift on high the good you find. Help to heal the hurts of life.

Be that helper nothing daunts – doubt of friend or taunt of foe.
Ever strive for liberty. Show the path that life should go.

Be that builder trusting good, bitter though the test may be:
Through all ages they are right, though they build in agony.

Be that teacher faith directs. Move beyond the old frontier:
Though the frightened fear that faith, be tomorrow’s pioneer.