

FRIENDLY MENTORSHIP

Benjamin D. Copple



Imagine for a moment that you are a new army recruit on the first day of boot camp. Young and raw, but full of energy and enthusiasm for your country, you enter as an immature, inexperienced, and innocent rookie. Over the next weeks and months, bulldog-like drill sergeants put you through drill after weary drill, borderline-sadistic trainers subject you to intense physical exercises designed to eradicate your frailties, and ancient instructors pound military information into your brain like a blacksmith with anger issues. At the end of boot camp you are stronger and wiser and bursting with anticipation to see the front lines and test your new skills. You ship out to the front lines ready to take on the world with nothing but your burning-hot desire to succeed.

Now imagine that on your first mission your commanding officer places you in a platoon of brand new recruits, with a sergeant from your same inexperienced cohort, on a dropship with a brand-new pilot—all of you fully trained and bursting with enthusiasm, but with no actual experience—and sends you to the front lines with no orders other than “advance.” How well do you think the battle would go? You might be able to get pretty far on your basic training and luck, but at some point you would face a challenge for which you hadn’t been trained. You’d attempt to put your knowledge to good use, but without actual experience, you would be ill equipped to deal with all the dangers that a live battlefield affords.

No army officer would trust a platoon with zero field experience on a solo mission in an active war zone, much less send them out with no instructions. Such a mission would be doomed to failure. That’s why new recruits are always put in squads with other experienced soldiers under an experienced sergeant, and why commanding officers give specific instructions to their men on how to proceed. Unfortunately, this is a bit like how young adults are introduced to the real world after graduating from the youth group. Young people are taught throughout junior high and high school by youth pastors and youth leaders how to be good, strong Christians, but once they reach college, they are on their own and find that they have no real experience in facing the world outside of church. They continue to fellowship with their youth group friends, but those friends are just as inexperienced as they are. Eventually they face a situation, a teacher, an argument, or a member of the opposite sex for which they are not prepared, and they fall, sometimes never to rise again.

Things do not have to be this way. The critical component that young people lack is experience; they haven’t lived long enough to acquire any. The only substitute for experience is a relationship with someone who has experience. This is where Hyphen young adults can make a crucial impact. If every experienced young adult would take a young person under his or her wing before said young person is thrust onto the battlefield of life, then young people would be much more equipped to handle the trials of life once they graduate into the real world. Every young adult has had some experiences in college, on the job, or elsewhere, and those experiences can be extremely valuable to a young person about to graduate from the youth group.



Most people would immediately call this mentoring, but that doesn't quite sum up what I am attempting to describe. Mentoring implies an older, experienced individual teaching and training a younger, inexperienced individual in a certain discipline. What I'm talking about is a little different. For one thing, you don't have to be much older than a young person to pass your experience along to them, nor do you have to be much more experienced than they are. You also don't have to consciously teach or train. What I am talking about is picking up an immature high school sophomore and taking him out to lunch just to talk. I'm talking about inviting a junior who is stressing about the future over to your house to help her apply for college. I'm talking about taking the nerdy senior who doesn't get out of the house much with you on a road trip from San Francisco to L.A. to trade in your car, and just letting him tell you about his problems. I'm talking about showing up to that shy girl's graduation even though her parents couldn't make it and cheering her on. None of these things are hard to do, or need tons of planning, but they will cause you to form relationships that will lead to important conversations. You don't have to preach a sermon, but somewhere along the line you'll get a chance to share critical experiences and hard-earned wisdom that might keep another person from falling.

Perhaps more important than what you actively share with a young person is the example that you set. Youth group kids tend to idolize Hyphen-age young adults, whether we like it or not, so you can be assured that someone in your church is watching and imitating every move you make. This mentoring relationship (or whatever we're going to call it) becomes more intense once you've already begun to share your experiences with someone. That young person will remember the things you've shared with them, and the next time a similar situation arises, they will watch to see how you react. I know this first hand from being a youth pastor and also a Hyphen. I have to watch every move I make when around my young people, lest I present an example that contradicts what I have taught them. Beyond the preaching and teaching that I do, I have always made a point to personally mentor my young people one-on-one, over coffee, lunch, or at any other time. I don't feel as if this heightened scrutiny is a burden; in fact, I see it as a blessing. Besides it serving as a simple way for me to instill godly principles into young people, it provides an extra reason for me to behave in a godly manner.

This experiential relationship (is that term more apt than "mentoring relationship"?) becomes even more crucial when the young person graduates and enters the real world. Once the person has started college or entered the work force, the trials will begin to come and he or she will need your experience more than ever. Stay close to that person, not in a parole officer-type of way, but in a brotherly or sisterly way. Point out things that he or she is doing wrong, and direct him or her in the right direction, but before you preach, be available to listen and encourage. Continue to share experiences with that person by relating your own, but also by taking that person along with you to share an experience with you in person.

The Bible gives at least two examples of the type of relationship I am trying to convey. The first is the love between David and Jonathan. The Bible tells us in I Samuel that Jonathan was the son of King Saul and a mighty warrior, and that when David was chosen to serve in his father's house, Jonathan took him into his confidence and became his closest friend. It's conceivable that as a mighty warrior, Jonathan mentored David in the ways of battle, and we know that he helped the inexperienced farm boy navigate the political maze of King Saul's court, ultimately helping David escape his father's jealous hands. Later on in I Samuel 23, after David left Saul's court and no longer needed Jonathan's advice or experience, Jonathan continued to encourage him and push him to accomplish all the things God had planned for him. Though the Bible does not give the ages of either man, their relationship is characterized as that of



an experienced friend helping an inexperienced one. In regards to the overall biblical narrative, David was by far the more important individual of the two, but without Jonathan's experience, advice, and encouragement, he might never have lasted long enough to do all the incredible exploits that the Bible describes.

The second example of this friendship mentoring, which is perhaps an even better term than experiential mentoring, is that of the relationship between Barnabas and Paul. As with Jonathan and David, the Bible does not give the ages of Barnabas or Paul; they may not have been young men or "Hyphen-aged," but their relationship was that of an older or more experienced Christian in Barnabas and a younger or more inexperienced one. The Bible says in Acts 9 that when the newly converted Paul went to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles, they were afraid of him and didn't believe he really was a disciple. Barnabas vouched for him and introduced him to the apostles. Later in Acts 11, it says that Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Paul to Antioch to be a part of the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit that Barnabas had sparked in the city. They stayed in Antioch for one year, teaching and building up the church. The situation is clear: Paul was learning how to be an apostle alongside the experienced church planter, Barnabas. Paul then traveled with Barnabas around the ancient world, learning from Barnabas how to start churches. The narrative eventually switches focus to Paul, who quickly surpassed Barnabas in power, authority, and notoriety, but it was Barnabas who initially mentored Paul on his journey. Like Jonathan, Barnabas is overshadowed in the Bible by his more famous friend, but had he not decided to invest in someone who was less experienced than he, Paul's incredible ministry might have been aborted in its infancy.

In both of the above examples, both pairs of men transitioned from a vertical relationship to a lateral one: the "mentor," for lack of a better term, became an equal. The older, more experienced friend slowly became just a friend. Maybe the best way to characterize this relationship is as a cross between mentoring and friendship, a "friendly mentorship." I don't mean to imply that Hyphen-aged young adults are so wise and experienced—in fact, I mean just the opposite. The faults you have, or the mistakes you made do not disqualify you from leading someone closer to Jesus, for your mistakes may keep another person from making the same ones. You may not think you have anything to offer a young person, but you do have one thing: your friendship, which may be worth more to a high school or junior high student than all the wise teachers in the world. Just be a friend; an older friend, yes, but the longer your relationship lasts, the smaller the age gap will seem, and eventually you'll just be friends. I encourage you to find a young person in your church or community and make that person your friend. Lead them in the right direction: closer to Jesus. Who knows? You may get a lifelong friend out of the deal. And that may be worth more to you than anything else in the world.