

## ON BEING MENTORED: A TRIBUTE TO HENRI NOUWEN



JEFF SHARP is a psychologist in private practice in Oakland, California. He has supervised psychotherapists at several clinics throughout the Bay Area, taught at several graduate schools, and has written about the training of psychotherapists and existential-humanistic models of psychotherapy. He is interested in the convergence of relational models of psychotherapy and existential-humanistic perspectives.

### Summary

This article is a first-person account of the author's experience of being mentored by the late Henri Nouwen, an inspiring priest and professor. The article describes the ongoing positive impact of that relationship upon the author's growth and development during his college years and early adulthood. The author argues that compassionate and inspiring mentors are of critical value to young men in today's world, particularly for individuals raised with distant, absent, or ineffective fathers. Key aspects of the mentoring process are deconstructed and delineated.

**Keywords:** *adult development; existential awareness; fatherless sons; men's issues; mentoring; Henri Nouwen; self; self-and-world construct*

When talking recently with a group of friends and colleagues, I heard one of them refer lightheartedly to us as "disciples" of Jim Bugental. Immediately I cringed, vehemently objecting to the term.

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Why did I react so negatively? After all, I feel deep gratitude and affection for Jim—a wise and generous man who mentored me in important ways. The answer has to do with my feelings about the term *disciple*, which implies dogmatic allegiance to a master whose teachings are beyond dispute. That is far different from the mentoring I have valued from Jim and others.

As I continued to ponder this issue, I kept wondering, “Why do I feel such profound gratitude toward several individuals who have mentored me, but particularly toward the late Henri Nouwen, an inspiring teacher who helped me find solid footing during a tumultuous and pivotal time in my life?”

This essay stems from my efforts to better understand the gratitude I feel for mentoring I have received. Reflecting upon this topic has helped me appreciate how crucial several individuals have been in my personal and professional development. At times, I have wished that my relationships with mentors progressed smoothly and led to immediate growth and success. However, that has rarely been the case. Struggling through pain, self-doubt, fear, and confusion has often been an essential aspect of the process. Acknowledging and confronting failure have also been essential. Resolving the tensions inherent in mentoring relationships has been critical. While writing this essay, revisiting certain memories has been a humbling yet transformative experience. Discussing my experiences with friends has helped me discover many commonalities and gradually convert embarrassment, guilt, and shame into understanding and compassion.

My intention is to illuminate fundamental elements of the mentoring process, particularly in relation to young men’s psychological development. I hope thereby to address important challenges confronting existential-humanistic psychologists: reconceptualizing and rearticulating the relationships between self and other and between self and culture (Montuori & Fahim, 2004).

These are not merely academic questions or issues. Rather, like many adults, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to mentor others. My efforts in analyzing this topic are guided, in part, by a desire to more effectively nurture, support, challenge, and otherwise mentor students, supervisees, and psychotherapy clients with whom I work.

There is another, more personal reason for writing this essay. My father died when I was 2 years old. He was a highly decorated World War II fighter pilot and test pilot. He tried to land a failing

jet and in the process crashed and died. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I heard many heroic stories about my father that filled me with great pride. But for me, he was an icon, not a human being from whom I could seek advice, play, argue, compete, or otherwise interact. Although I was proud of my father, I virtually never knew him. Consequently, I have always been sensitive to parent-child relationships. I am moved, when providing psychotherapy, when a father and son, mother and daughter, or any parent and child are able to bridge the chasm between them while simultaneously respecting each other's autonomy.

At times, I have wondered if the immense satisfaction that I experience during such therapeutic interactions results primarily from indirectly addressing my own wounds or unmet needs. Today, though, I realize that awareness of the impact of my early loss, coupled with my ongoing clinical training, has given me empathy and tools to help others address similarly painful processes. My wounds, then, are not a liability but potentially an asset, if I continually seek to remain conscious of whether, or how, they affect my needs in various relationships. Studying and writing about mentoring have helped me better understand and work with emotions and needs that surface in my personal and professional relationships.

And finally, writing this essay is a way of saying thanks—to Henri, to Jim, and to other individuals who have generously supported my personal and professional growth in invaluable ways.

## CULTURAL NEEDS

Our culture needs more mentors. As many of our fundamental institutions—the family, the workplace, the educational system, the church—undergo transformation and upheaval, we are often left with a sense of isolation and insignificance. Our society's worship of technology, material goods, and fame devalues the importance of the daily struggles that we all face. Amid the ever-expanding impact of corporate politics and competitiveness, we risk losing sight of the value of nurturing relationships. As our culture is increasingly "informed" by sitcoms, flashy videos, and sound bites, the nuances of intimate human relationships are overlooked or grossly distorted. Voices extolling the virtues of healthy interdependence are barely audible in the clamor of our overall culture.

For many males, the concept of healthy interdependence is an oxymoron. Young boys as well as adult males continue to be powerfully socialized to fear depending on others. To reveal vulnerability is to risk ridicule and humiliation; to be vulnerable is synonymous with being weak, a “sissy,” a “wimp,” or other derogatory terms. Consequently, many boys and young men are drawn to caricatures of masculinity such as the steroid-enhanced pseudo-savages of the immensely popular Worldwide Wrestling Federation. Millions of boys and young men regularly watch the spectacle of men brutalizing other men (and sometimes women), smashing them with any available weapon in choreographed mayhem. Other young men regularly ingest dangerous steroids to get buffed and make an athletic team. Still others become more numb and violent and fall into the worlds of addiction, gangs, and homicide. Others become soldiers, not out of political convention, but in order to somehow prove themselves. These young men seem intent on proving their “masculinity,” which is viewed as an absence of fear, vulnerability, tenderness, compassion, or any feelings other than rage. The tragic shootings and massacres we have witnessed in schools and workplaces and the torture of prisoners represent horrendous extremes of this syndrome.

Fortunately, in recent years, a number of men have addressed the immense cost of trying to live up to unattainable myths of masculinity—of going through life numb, isolated, fiercely independent, desperate to achieve, and fearful of revealing vulnerability. The emergence of the mythopoetic men’s movement reflected the yearning of men for the opportunity to talk about their experiences and struggles (Gilbert, 1992). Other men who are outside of and sometimes critical of the mythopoetic movement have also written openly about men’s inner struggles. The popularity of books by Albom (1997), Bly (1990), Keen (1991), Pittman (1993), and Real (1997) reveals the breadth and depth of men’s desire for more open and supportive relationships.

The archetypal power of father-son relationships has been discussed from sociological, anthropological, mythical, and psychological perspectives (Katz, 2002; Pittman, 1993; Shapiro, 1993). A great deal has been written about the cultural forces that have led to distant, absent, or ineffective fathers in recent generations and the resultant trauma, numbing, and “father hunger” that many men have experienced (Kipnis, 1991; Pittman, 1993; Shapiro, 1993). A common theme has been the enormous cost that men pay

by trying to live up to the “masculine mystique” (Pittman, 1993) and not acknowledging their vulnerability and relational needs (Real, 1997). Psychoanalytic theory posits that the persistence of unresolved childhood needs for a father can lead to submission to an authoritarian, destructive guru (Storr, 1996). The importance of effective fathering as a means of combating these problems has been emphasized (Pittman, 1993; Real, 1997; Shapiro, 1993), and the healing power of reconciliation between fathers and sons has been addressed (Katz, 2002). Other authors have called attention to the invaluable impact of mentoring upon the development of young men (Bly, 1990; Keen, 1991; Levinson, 1978; Pittman, 1993; Shapiro, 1993).

#### PURSUIT OF THE DREAM

But what constitutes effective mentoring? The term *mentor* is applied to a vast array of relationships ranging from single, impactful, or relatively superficial interactions to ongoing relationships carefully nurtured for several years. The disparate uses of the term make it difficult to characterize effective mentoring.

Daniel Levinson’s studies of adult development shed considerable light on the nature of effective mentoring. Levinson studied the impact of mentoring—effective, ineffective, or glaringly absent—in adult development. Although he listed numerous functions of a mentor—such as serving as a teacher, a sponsor, a host and guide, and an exemplar—he underscored one function as “developmentally the most crucial one: to support and facilitate the *realization of the Dream*” (1978, p. 98). Levinson described the Dream as

more formed than a pure fantasy, yet less articulated than a fully thought out plan. It is the central issue in Martin Luther King’s historic “I have a dream” speech. It is the meaning Delmore Schwartz intended with the title of his story “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities.” Many young men have a Dream of the kind of life they want to lead as adults. The vicissitudes and fate of the Dream have fundamental consequences for adult development.

In its primordial form, the Dream is a vague sense of self-in-adult-world. It has the quality of a vision, an imagined possibility that generates excitement and vitality.” (1978, p. 91)

I was jolted when I first read the above passage. Levinson's analysis succinctly captured much of what I have cherished about my relationships with Henri Nouwen: At a time when I felt great vulnerability and uncertainty, he helped me ferret out, nurture, and pursue my own fragile dream.

All mentoring occurs in a specific social and historical context. My relationship with Henri involved a complex interplay of internal (psychological) and external (social-historical) forces. To convey the impact of his mentoring, I must briefly describe a few key aspects of my psychological development during a pivotal time in my life.

I met Henri when I went off to college during the exciting, stormy, highly polarized political and cultural events of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The volatility of that era amplified the chaos of my inner world. My sense of self-worth fluctuated radically: I vacillated from grandiosity to despair, from self-righteousness to self-doubt.

Bugental's (1987) concept of "self and world construct" has helped me make sense out of an otherwise overwhelming array of memories, associations, impressions, thoughts, and feelings. Bugental described the self-and-world construct system in the following passage:

Each of us must develop or construct a conception of who and what she is and of what her world is, how it operates, and how she can make her way in it. We come to have some notion of our own strengths and weaknesses, our own needs, the dangers which particularly threaten us, and the kinds of things or states of being we will seek or avoid. The potential world is immense; always we must make some compromise with possibility to secure the livable. (1987, p. 178)

Trying to briefly describe, or summarize, the fundamental aspects of my self-and-world construct from more than 25 years ago is a daunting, ultimately impossible challenge. One's currently shifting moods and perspectives color, distort, and filter out not only what one recalls from one's past but also how one interprets and feels about prior events. My intention here is not to present a comprehensive description of my sense of self, and the world, as a young man. Rather, I hope to demonstrate how Henri's mentoring provided an anchor and a source of inspiration as my youthful self-

and-world construct twice was shattered and reconstructed. Through that process, my grandiose dreams disintegrated. Eventually, more viable dreams replaced them.

### *Leaving Home*

And who's goin' to be the one,  
to say it was no good what we done;  
I dare man to say I'm too young,  
for I'm goin' to try for the sun. (Leitch, 1966, side 2, track 6)

Like thousands of other young men, I set out for college in 1969 with an inflated sense of manhood, a passionate interest in social and political matters, a tenuous confidence in my intellectual abilities, and an easily sparked outrage at perceived injustices. I was immensely ambitious, determined to change the world. I tended to see the world through the adolescent lens of black or white, all or nothing, good or bad. I wanted to believe that evil existed only outside of me. Clearly, many of those traits are common among young men of any generation.

My inflated sense of masculinity illustrates how an interplay of cultural and family forces shaped my self-and-world construct. As a teenager in suburban California, I had been surrounded and deeply influenced by popular culture, particularly folk and rock music. I believed in my bones Dylan's decree that "the times, they are a changing" and the rallying cry of Crosby, Stills, and Nash that "we can change the world;" I was determined to follow Donovan's lead and "try for the sun." I was also actively involved in and deeply influenced by leftist politics. I recall feeling inspired and determined as I sang, along with hundreds and sometimes thousands of others, "we shall overcome" at Civil Rights and anti-war demonstrations. I was also shocked, and radicalized, as I watched policemen crack fellow demonstrators' skulls and haul bloodied individuals into paddy wagons. Unfortunately, I was also swayed by many of the simplistic slogans of that era such as, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem," and "Don't trust anyone over 30." Such slogans, coupled with the events I witnessed, polarized my view of the world.

Dionysian elements were everywhere, which amplified the polarizations I experienced. Demonstrations often merged with "be-ins" and "love-ins" replete with endless music, body painting,

free food, and, of course, drugs. My use of marijuana and occasional psychedelics contributed to intermittent experiences of feeling merged or at one with other participants and further alienated me from mainstream culture. Unfortunately, I lacked the capacity, and the desire, to bring much critical thinking into these experiences. Without such reflection, I remained, in some costly ways, naive.

My sense of what it means to be a man was inflated by stories, pictures, and articles about my father. He had, by all accounts, “the right stuff,” which Tom Wolfe (1979) described in his book about test pilots of that generation. Commemorative albums about my father display photographs of a brash, handsome, well-built man who appeared supremely comfortable and competent in his Air Force milieu. The albums also contain thoughtful, romantic letters to my mother and newspaper and magazine articles about his numerous military accomplishments as a fighter pilot during the war and later as a test pilot. Even his death heightened this ideal. My father could have safely ejected from his plane when he discovered engine trouble while flying over Kansas City. To do so, however, would have jeopardized the lives of the people below him. He sacrificed his life to save the lives of others.

Because no mortal ever replaced him as a day-in, day-out father figure in our home, I developed an inflated and heroic view of manhood: not only bright, buffed, handsome, disciplined, responsible, and charming, but also willing to surrender one’s life for a cause—in essence, to be fearless and flawless.

At home, I was drawn to the role of peacemaker. As the youngest child, I often felt frightened when I witnessed conflict within my family. Consequently, I frequently attempted to avoid, or smooth over, arguments or fights. I certainly rebelled as a teenager, indulging in my own excursions into sex, drugs, rock and roll, and petty crime, but I generally did so discreetly.

In high school, I learned more about competing than about developing healthy interdependence. I won a few academic honors and earned a scholarship to Yale—so I knew I had some smarts. But beneath a sometimes-cocky persona, my confidence was shaky. Although academic success came relatively easily, I felt the insecurities that plague all adolescents. Because I certainly was no great athlete, artist, musician, surfer, or lady’s man, the attention and praise I received for academic achievements and through leadership roles were important sources of my self-esteem.

Like most young men, I learned to keep my doubts and insecurities to myself, because to visibly struggle would not have been “cool.” This attitude would haunt me at Yale—and would influence my relationship with Henri.

Armed with the brashness of youth, along with the desire to address and rectify our country’s social problems, I was thrilled to set off for college with the hope of tackling the issues of that era. Yale was, in many respects, exactly what I had hoped for: a lively, intensely stimulating environment of intellectual fervor and debate.

Contrary to its staid, conservative image, Yale was a center of radical politics during my freshman year. Bobby Seale, then chairman of the Black Panther Party, was on trial in New Haven for conspiracy to commit murder. Consequently, the other members of “The Chicago Eight” from the infamous trial after the Democratic convention in 1968 converged in New Haven and made Yale the center of political protest during the spring of my freshman year.

Eventually, the university was shut down. “Teach-ins” replaced courses. Rhetoric replaced critical thinking. Mass “feed-ins” were orchestrated for demonstrators who arrived from around the country. Polemical speeches drew thousands of students and demonstrators. A great deal of spirited discussion ensued. Unfortunately, the rhetoric often was simplistic and polarizing and frequently advocated violence. Fiery speeches by Black Panthers advocated “off the pigs” and ended with the slogan, “All power to the straight shooters.” Some demonstrations eventually became violent and were met with tear gas from the National Guard. Polarizations intensified.

Amidst this, my naive and grandiose hopes to “unite the left” or somehow “get the revolution going” were shattered. Although I continued to hold strong leftist political views, I could no longer deceive myself that “we activists” were free from any responsibility for the problems of the world. I could no longer overlook or justify some demonstrators’ violent and provocative behavior such as throwing bricks through storefronts or harassing authority figures, particularly the National Guard, through taunting, dehumanizing name calling. I began to see the narrowness and simplicity of the political rhetoric and felt chilled, saddened, and sobered as tear gas wafted into my dorm room, and I could neither resolve the conflicts nor attribute all blame to “the bad guys.”

In retrospect, my self-and-world construct was crumbling. I had lost faith in large-scale political demonstrations and thereby lost my sense of purpose, direction, and meaning.

I then unwittingly began, during a 2-year period, a series of somewhat disjointed experiments similar to those undertaken by countless young adults of that era. I worked with inner-city youth in a Big Brother program. I studied Marxism and Latin American revolutions, worked with peasants in Mexico as part of a Quaker work-study program, and briefly idolized Zapata, Che, and Fidel. I lived on communes and wholeheartedly embraced the values of the counterculture. I fell in love with two wonderful women and learned the agony of being dumped as well as that of dumping someone. I left college and studied ceramics while living in a tent in the Rockies.

When I returned to college for my junior year, I began to feel frightened and lost. I felt pressure to become one of the “thousand male leaders” that Yale President Kingman Brewster proclaimed the university annually owed the world; his widely quoted phrase amplified my sense of needing to do something heroic. However, I couldn’t envision my future. I felt no calling to be a potter, I finally realized that I could never become a Latin American revolutionary, and I had become disillusioned with reductionistic aspects of orthodox Marxism and various socialist experiments. I tried to nurture fantasies of becoming a doctor or lawyer, but I hated hospitals and could not envision myself practicing law.

I was scared. I felt that, like Icarus, I had soared too close to the sun and then crashed and burned. I felt I was draining resources from this great institution and that I had nothing to give back to the community. My grandiose, naive hopes had been dashed and nothing had emerged to replace them. Once again, Dylan’s (1965) lyrics filled my head, but this time I felt haunted with a sense of shame as I ruminated about his refrain, “How does it feel, to be on your own, with no direction home, like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone?” (Track 1).

## HENRI’S GIFTS

At about that time, I met Henri Nouwen, a man far removed from the counterculture, psychedelia, and Marxism. Henri was,

paradoxically, a calming and yet inspiring presence for a lost soul such as myself. A priest from the Netherlands, Henri taught at Yale Divinity School, gave sermons to the university community, wrote prolifically, and occasionally led ecumenical retreats. I was far from alone in my appreciation of Henri: His sermons and courses were packed, his books (he ultimately wrote more than 40) were translated and read around the world, and he was continually recruited by prominent universities (he also taught for years at Notre Dame and Harvard). His popularity reflected his gift for describing his own psychological and spiritual struggles in a manner that was comforting and inspiring to others.

Henri gave me seven interrelated gifts. In hindsight, each of these gifts altered my self-and-world construct and helped me clarify and pursue my dreams. First, he revealed an authentic presence, a depth of character, which I found reassuring and comforting. Although many of my professors were eloquent and endlessly witty, none of them so openly addressed their doubts and struggles along with their certainties and beliefs. Amidst the turbulence of the early 1970s, the combination of Henri's candor about his struggles coupled with his passionate involvement in life was a salve to my insecurity and uprootedness. Henri was excitable and extremely productive, yet he remained sensitive to others' vulnerabilities as well as his own. He was a highly disciplined priest, yet he retained a boyish enthusiasm and infectious smile. Given my own proclivity to fall either into almost manic overinflation or a depressive deflation, I found Henri's ability to articulate and integrate his mood swings and his strengths and vulnerabilities to be comforting and inspiring. He altered my self-and-world construct by demonstrating that a man could be passionate, productive, and socially engaged—and yet still experience doubt, insecurity, and loneliness.

Henri provided far more than openness and authenticity. His second gift was to introduce me to an existential perspective that emphasized the importance of solitude; this worldview provided me an anchor when I desperately needed one. The anchor was neither a dogma nor a doctrine. Rather than discussing philosophy or theology in a formal, academic manner, Henri emphasized the radical notion that grappling with one's own doubts and uncertainties was an essential aspect of living a meaningful and creative life. Whereas I previously felt embarrassed and defensive about my doubts and uncertainties—particularly within the intensely com-

petitive atmosphere of Yale—Henri helped me see their inevitability and universality.

Amidst the turbulence of that era, I found Henri's emphasis on the importance of solitude to be comforting and grounding. At a time when I was facing my insignificance in the grand scale of things, he helped me appreciate that in solitude I could begin to explore not only my fears and doubts but also my hopes, dreams, strengths, and needs. Having so desperately sought a formula, doctrine, or career path—something outside of myself—that would provide certainty and easy answers, I was comforted by the realization that only through grappling with hopes, fears, and doubts could I begin to sort out my deepest yearnings and needs.

Henri emphasized that solitude was not something one obtained so much as something one pursued. That is, he viewed life as an ongoing process of discovery, revelation, prayer, creativity, and the deepening of relationships. He repeatedly emphasized that his spiritual life was built upon an ongoing quest to be close to God and that union with God, or with Christ, was to be pursued but not obtained.

Henri showed me that the pursuit of solitude is, ironically, inextricably linked with community. Through solitude, we discover our deepest cares, needs, loves, hopes, and dreams. We then can reenter relationships and communities with the hope and intention of giving, providing, and sometimes receiving—but with a greater sense of awe, purpose, humility, and self. Henri's courses included readings and discussions of a broad range of authors—Christians, Buddhists, philosophers, psychologists, and poets—who addressed the importance of solitude in one's quest for meaningful work and relationships. His teachings enriched my own nascent spiritual beliefs that had been shaped by Unitarian and Quaker philosophy and practice.

Henri introduced me to Rilke's (1993) *Letters to a Young Poet*, which has inspired me for 30 years. In response to an aspiring writer's questions of, "Is my poetry good?" and "Should I write?" Rilke wrote,

You are looking outward, and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places in your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you would have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all—ask yourself in the stillest

hour of your night: *must* I write? And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple “I must,” then build your life according to this necessity. (1993, p. 19)

Rilke added in a later letter,

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. (1993, p. 35)

I was riveted by Rilke’s words. They helped me realize that I had been looking externally for an answer I could only find internally. I began to let go of nagging questions about what I “should” do and focused instead on the vague fantasies I’d had for years about becoming a community activist or mediator.

Henri provided a third gift that continues, to this day, to illuminate many of my core values as a psychologist. The gift was the metaphor of “the wounded healer” (Nouwen, 1972). Henri argued that a fundamental task for a minister or counselor “is to recognize the sufferings in his own heart and make that recognition the starting point of his service” (Nouwen, 1972, p. xvi). Making one’s own wounds a source of healing, he wrote, requires “a constant willingness to see one’s own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all (individuals) share” (Nouwen, 1972, p. 88). A critical aspect of spiritual leadership is the ability to articulate the movements of one’s inner life and offer oneself to others as a source of clarification. To avoid self-indulgent spiritual exhibitionism, a healer must also develop what Henri termed hospitality (which is akin to empathy) and concentration (which involves differentiating one’s own needs from those of clients or counselees). The metaphor of the wounded healer has helped me see universal aspects of my limitations, and the importance, while conducting therapy, of appreciating clients’ strengths as well as their weaknesses.

The fourth gift that Henri gave me was his agreement to be my advisor for my senior thesis in philosophy and psychology. I was honored that he agreed to take on that role; his sponsorship helped me validate the importance of what I was studying. I felt excited as I outlined my course of study. Little did I know that I would be opening a Pandora’s box!

In an effort to integrate my political concerns and ambitions with my emerging psychological mindedness, for my thesis, I examined Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence from a depth psychological perspective. I wanted to understand better the moral ground of Gandhi's philosophy and at the same time write about how his perspective fit into my own worldview and daily life. I read books by Gandhi as well as commentaries on his philosophy of nonviolence. Foremost among those commentaries was Erikson's (1993) respectful yet powerful critique of aggression and hostility that occasionally marred Gandhi's life.

While reading Erikson, particularly his analysis of subtle, unconscious forms of aggression and neediness, I ran right into something I had no intention of encountering: my shadow. I began to see previously veiled aspects of my self. Suddenly, I came to see that much of my quest for power was motivated not by a love of politics, or a love of humankind, or a sense of having solutions to complex political problems, but out of a craving for power and adulation. Whew! It was humbling and frightening to be confronted by my yearning for adulation at a time when I felt such a lack of direction and confidence. In no way could I put into words what I was discovering about my self. My self-and-world construct was again shattered as I came face to face with my own neediness and uncertainty.

I panicked. It was weeks before graduation from college, which I had assumed would be a pinnacle in my life, and I knew there was no way I could write a coherent essay about what I had uncovered. I approached Henri and briefly explained my situation. I told him that I wanted to take an incomplete for the course, change my thesis into a quantitative study, and graduate the following year.

At that moment, Henri gave me a fifth gift. He looked me directly in the eyes and said that if I wanted to do a quantitative study, that was my choice, but that he and I had an agreement and he expected me to keep it. He expected me to complete my paper whether it was for credit or not, and he offered to give me a grade and allow me to graduate on time with the understanding that I would finish the paper as soon as possible.

I was astonished. I had fallen flat on my face, and he hadn't given up on me. His response conveyed his faith in me and reiterated, in a very concrete way, the importance of honoring my struggle and quest for purpose and meaning.

I accepted his offer and gave up on my plan (which had never appealed to me) of doing a quantitative study. I graduated with my classmates, knowing I had important work to finish. I spent several tortuous months completing my senior thesis and eventually sent it off to Henri. As a scholarly piece, it stank, but the process of completing my essay helped me appreciate the value of persistence and transform my sense of self. I began to see myself not only as someone who had failed but also as someone who had coped with failure. I began to appreciate my own resilience.

During the following years, Henri gave me a sixth gift: He remained a supportive confidant, through letters, as I sought direction and grappled with questions about my future. While working in psychiatric hospitals, I discovered I enjoyed the combination of providing counseling, being part of a team, and earning my own paycheck. I learned a great deal, but after 2 years, I was tired of following others' orders, not having my opinions taken seriously, and living barely above poverty level. With considerable apprehension, I considered applying to divinity schools, graduate schools in psychology, or medical schools to study psychiatry. Eventually, I realized that divinity school would be, for me, an academic rather than a spiritual experience and that I felt most at home in the world of existential and humanistic psychology. Honoring this recognition meant, of course, not following in Henri's path and further differentiating from his worldview. Henri's support of my decision was steadfast. From his unwavering support, I learned that I could feel accepted by an authority figure even as I differentiated from him.

"We're all bozos on this bus," proclaimed Ken Kesey and his gang of pranksters. During my college years, I often felt liberated by that phrase; it infused me with energy and the freedom to be zany and risk screwing up. But I associated that phrase with escapism, along with the then-popular slogan, "Reality is for people who can't handle drugs." Henri provided me a seventh gift that helped me integrate playful spontaneity and zaniness into my world of work and overly ponderous pursuit of matters meaningful, spiritual, or therapeutic. Describing the importance of clowns, he wrote,

Clowns are not in the center of the events. They appear between the great acts, fumble and fall, and make us smile again after the tensions created by the heroes we came to admire. The clowns don't have it together; they do not succeed in what they try to do, they are awkward, out of balance, and left-handed, but . . . they are on our side. We respond to them not with admiration but with sympathy,

not with amazement but with understanding, not with tension but with a smile. Of the virtuosi we say, "How can they do it?" Of the clowns we say, "They are like us." The clowns remind us with a tear and a smile that we share the same human weaknesses. (Nouwen, 1979, p. 3)

Henri's writings, his exuberant smile, and his sense of humor about himself helped me see my own struggles and shortcomings in a more humorous light.

### WORKING THROUGH AND GIVING BACK

I have uncovered, while reflecting upon my youthful sojourn, a lingering sense of sadness, embarrassment, and guilt about missed opportunities, struggles, and unfulfilled obligations. Writing about my ventures has helped me put those painful feelings to rest.

The guilt, for example, stemmed from knowing I had not (prior to writing this essay) sufficiently acknowledged my gratitude for the mentoring I received from Henri. For years, I felt embarrassed about my struggles at Yale. Those feelings prevented me from publicly acknowledging my appreciation for Henri's gifts. Reflecting further upon young men's development has led me to appreciate universal aspects of my journey, which has helped me overcome my embarrassment. Writing this essay has helped me relinquish the lingering guilt.

I am much less harsh these days in my judgments about my youthful self. I feel affection for that idealistic, romantic, impressionable young man who set out to change the world, was humbled and brought to his knees, stumbled upon a remarkable teacher, and somehow had the wisdom to sit and listen. I recall leaving Henri's office, after several of my talks with him, thrilled to have found a reason to stay at Yale. At the time, I felt immense appreciation, and sometimes awe, toward Henri. Today, I can see that Henri appreciated that searching young student. Henri and I were individuals of different generations from radically different cultures: a disillusioned, agnostic, quasi-hippie from California and a highly disciplined, ascetic priest from Holland. It is remarkable that we developed such a powerful relationship.

Previously, I felt guilt about not having shared more of myself with Henri. During a volatile, chaotic era, I was flexing a variety of muscles and exploring a number of roles that I was not prepared to

discuss with him. Nor was I able to discuss with him the skepticism and anger that I felt toward the Catholic Church. Henri would have welcomed discussion of these issues, and I'm certain that he would have responded with empathy and provocative questions that would have enriched my understanding of the challenges of my young adulthood.

Today, though, I am more accepting of my youthful reticence. I shared what I was ready to share with Henri. His respect for my needs and limitations helped me, in ensuing years, to work closely with other mentors. He helped me gain greater faith in myself and greater trust in others. As I matured and developed a more cohesive, resilient, and robust sense of self, I became more willing and able to respectfully lock horns with mentors and other important people in my life. Henri's gifts help set in motion an ongoing process that neither one of us could predict at the time.

I've also felt sadness as I've thought about the limitations, throughout my adulthood, in my relationship with Henri. After college, I occasionally wrote to Henri, filling him in on my evolving professional life and the rewards and challenges I experienced as a husband and a father. Henri responded with thoughtful, supportive letters. Sometimes he sent me copies of his books with highlighted passages that addressed issues I had mentioned. On several occasions, I wanted to visit Henri, talk with him as an adult rather than as the young college student he once knew. But he lived thousands of miles away, traveled extensively, and frequently went on spiritual retreats and was unreachable by mail. I put off visiting him. And then, in his mid 60s, Henri abruptly died of a heart attack. My procrastinating deprived me of a great opportunity. Like thousands of people around the world, I experienced enormous grief about his death.

## CONCLUSION

I share the opinion of Montuori and Fahim (2004) that a critical challenge facing humanistic psychologists is to further articulate and conceptualize the relationship between self and others and self and culture. My narrative, above, is an effort to articulate key aspects of those relationships during my own young adulthood. Now I would like to look more conceptually at the phenomena of

mentoring and also at the relationship between self and others and self and culture.

I argued earlier that a young man's transition into adulthood can be greatly facilitated and enhanced by effective mentoring. I also argued that Levinson (1978) identified the fundamental aspect of the mentoring process: facilitating the realization of the dream. But that assertion is deceptively simple, particularly in relationship to the development of young men with distant, absent, or ineffective fathers.

My own entry into adulthood is illustrative and reveals the need for further conceptualization. I experienced neither a smooth, graceful transition nor an exhilarating process of self-actualization. In its tumultuousness, I suspect my journey was more similar to than different from that of most young men. As a White, middle-class male I was obviously privileged in many respects. As a young man who essentially never knew his father, I was handicapped in other respects. As someone who left home and came of age during the late 60s and early 70s, I was blessed and cursed by the freedom and excesses of that era. As young adult who felt as if he prematurely soared too close to the sun, I repeated a journey that humans have experienced for millennia.

In their analysis of cross-cultural encounters, Montuori and Fahim (2004) highlighted four concepts that I believe help clarify the process of coming of age for many (but certainly not all) young adults: culture shock, personality disintegration, positive disintegration, and ego strength. Building upon Peter Adler's (1975) seminal work on cross-cultural experiences, they underscored the potential value of culture shock as an opportunity for personal growth. For many youths, the experience of leaving home entails a considerable amount of culture shock. Certainly that was true for me. I experienced, among other things, the shock of living 3,000 miles away from home, attending a highly competitive university, being immersed in violent political demonstrations, living and working with peasants in a Third World village, living in a commune, experimenting with psychedelic drugs, falling in and out of love, volunteering with low-income inner-city youth, and encountering shadowy aspects of my personality through readings in depth psychology. My experiences were hardly unique; many of my peers underwent similar experiences.

Montuori and Fahim (2004) addressed the experience of “personality disintegration” as an integral aspect of cross-cultural experiences. Echoing Adler (1975), they reframed what is commonly viewed as a negative experience (confusion, disorientation, and a drop in coping skills and efficacy) as a potential opportunity for learning and personal growth via expansion of one’s sense of self and creative encounters with others. Montuori and Fahim linked this perspective with the existential tenet that crisis is potentially an opportunity for understanding, becoming, and transformation (May, 1975). They called attention to Dabrowski’s (1964) concept of “positive disintegration” and the argument that “personal growth can occur when one’s capacity to make meaning of the world is challenged, and one can come back and reintegrate at a higher, more inclusive level” (Montuori & Fahim, 2004, p. 259). In time, one develops greater and greater “ego strength,” which Barron (1995) referred to as the ability to counter and recover from setbacks and to “right oneself when one is falling over” (p. 170).

In utilizing these concepts to shed light on the process of coming of age, there is the risk of romanticizing the destabilization of self. Like Ginsberg (1956) a generation before me and like countless individuals in ensuing decades, I saw some of “the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness.” Some friends committed suicide. Some experienced crushing psychotic breaks; others fell into debilitating addictions. Some dropped out and quit caring. Others turned into jaundiced, cynical members of corporate America. Various manifestations of these patterns can be found within all generations. The successful transition from adolescent into adult is obviously not guaranteed by experiencing personality disintegration.

This is why mentoring can play such a crucial role in the lives of young adults. Effective mentoring can help young adults move toward creativity and ego strength rather than toward madness or apathy. Certainly Henri’s guidance and ongoing trust helped me cope with considerable confusion, fear, and lack of direction. By helping me tease out and doggedly pursue my dream, he helped me develop a more complex, resilient, and robust sense of self and a view of the world that included a profound appreciation for the importance of mutually supportive relationships. This has enriched and enhanced every facet of my personal and professional life.

“The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom,” proclaimed Blake (1975, p. xviii). From my current vantage point on the downhill side of 50, I appreciate that I learned a great deal from my youthful ventures and adventures, many of which were excessive. On the other hand, as May (1975) has persuasively argued, creativity “requires limits, for the creative act arises out of the struggle of human beings with and against that which limits them” (p. 113). My gut-level understanding of May’s point was facilitated, at a critical juncture, by Henri’s wise counsel and generous acts when I had little faith in myself. I am profoundly grateful for Henri’s mentoring.

Zimbardo (2001), addressing the enormous challenges we face in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks upon America, argued that

Heroism is to be defined not only as the sacrifice of life for others, but broadened to include the opening of ourselves to the needs of others. Heroes are ready and willing to share their precious commodities, like their time and sense of vulnerability with others in meaningful face-to-face encounters. They rise above the pressures toward mindless compliance and situationally induced conformity. They are both uniquely individual and uniquely socially focused. (p. 50)

A mentor, through opening his or herself to the needs of protégés, may have the opportunity not only to promote professional advancement but also to deepen an individual’s appreciation of what it means to be human. Our profession, our communities, and our world desperately need individuals with passion, warmth, discipline, compassion, and humility. Effective mentoring can foster those qualities.

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Reprint requests: Jeff Sharp, Ph.D., 5435 College Ave., Suite 202, Oakland, CA 94618; e-mail: JGileSharp@aol.com.