

**THE MOST PRECIOUS RECIPE:
CREATING MEANING, IDENTITY, AND SELF WORTH**
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Pacific Unitarian Universalist Church
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A member of our congregation, Craig, won the privilege of picking the topic of today's sermon at PUC's Auction Party this year.

Last year, during our first service in August, at almost this exact time, I read these words from Austen Petersen the RE director at the UU church in Williamsburg Virginia.

"The first time I saw Bowie in a movie I was 12 or 13, in the grips of major family illness and had little sense of how to deal with— let's face it, existence itself. David Bowie made me feel so much less alone and so much happier than I ever would have been without his existing. He was my minister of strange, my muse of alienation and made looking like an androgynous alien look classy, fun and ever so attainable. Bowie has made my life richer and deeper."

This service is about that. No, sorry, not Bowie again, but about the broader experience of encountering someone whose presence grounds or guides you. For probably similar reasons, today is about that powerful—at times-magical—experience of meeting a role-model, mentor, or an icon. If we pushed this topic to the real subject of Craig's wishes, we might even be willing to say that what inspires us could even be beyond the human realm. Perhaps to a work of art, or a piece of music that moves us and allows us to make sense of the world. A muse that pushes us. However, for the sake of keeping this to under 20 minutes, we are limiting it to humans.

More specifically, our subject is an exploration of the psychological experience we have when we encounter those that end up either validating our present sense of self, or presenting us with a version of a possible new us that we had not considered. Craig, and soon I, were interested in both the magical "Ah ha" quality of these encounters and why they can be so powerful. Being smitten by these unpredictable and potent moments, we are naturally led to wanting to explore something about the role these mentor/icons have in forming our identity. Our concern extends beyond curiosity, though. In every conversation it was brought up how it was the duty of this sermon, our church, and society in general to ponder how we facilitate more of these positive life transforming experiences into happening.

That's a big subject matter for fifteen minutes of sermon. To make matters worse, what Craig and I are trying to get at is a little fuzzy. As I said in the intro, these psychological "experiences" don't exactly have a name. Believe me, I searched. Googling "the experience of finding an icon, or role model" or phrases like it most commonly led me into literature on mentoring—a good label, but not perfect.

What's fuzzy about today's theme is that these revelatory, identity shaping, purpose clarifying experiences come in a near infinite variety of forms. There is a chance this kind of life shifting experience will happen when a twelve-year-old 'tween encounters her new sixteen-year-old babysitter. What else is the Big Brother, Big Sister program other than the opportunity for these feelings and moments to happen.

Generally, less appreciated, is the revelatory role a celebrity like a Bowie, or an RBG can spark in a fan without having ever met. As Bowie himself said, "*Glam really did plant seeds for a new identity. I think a lot of kids needed that - that sense of reinvention. Kids learned that however crazy you may think it is, there is a place for what you want to do and who you want to be.*" The life confirming or altering people we encounter are multi-varied.

I resonate with this topic probably because I, and others, have had the experience of finding people who made us who we are. One friend found that confirmation in a couple named Jack and Mary who owned a lab, and provided him both chances to grow and an image to emulate professionally. For me it was a field

internship with Rev. Roger Paine in 1998 that proved to be an important stone in the river to land on as I was learning both the arts and skills of ministry and that of a fully adult me. I have promised to call Roger when I arrive at either.

For many people these pivot points are not about career. Part of what is interesting about the icons, mentors, and role models that move us is we can't fully script them. The how, who, where, when, or on what aspect of our lives will get shaped is somewhat predictable given context. Surely, setting up a talented young dancer to live with an experienced coach is likely to be important, but you can't fully orchestrate this stuff. The people we encounter who end up mattering is a mix of predictable statistical probability and luck. We really are part of an interdependent web, with strands that get plucked without much foreshadowing. I suspect part of why my friend was intrigued by this small aspect of identity development was that as a computer scientist, he knows you exactly can't dial it up to happen with the perfect series of zeros and ones.

Even if Craig and I have stumbled into an area that doesn't fit comfortably into a search engine bar, we all know what I am talking about. We really are interdependent with both the people we rub shoulders with and the icons that we put posters of on our walls, these heroes that help give us some security in the present, or help us become our future selves come in a thousand different forms. The guiding stars that direct what we do and who we become can be a Nipsey Hussle, the local lacrosse coach, or Lindsey Graham.

Craig and I wanted today to be both a chance to honor the truth that most often, without much fanfare, it is part of the human condition for us to have these revelatory people and experiences that transcend role and impact us beyond prediction. Never always sliding into the formal role of mentors, or advisors, there really are people who may not play starring roles in the story our lives, but serve as memorable supporting cast members that allow for important plot twists that make us who we are.

We know it is true because when you start asking people about their stones in the river, their Bowies, their beloved biology teacher, their Aunt Mary, they light up.

One of the young women who works up at MOD pizza up the hill responded to my question immediately, mentioned the valuable role her much older brother, "her dude" as she called him, played for her as a surrogate parent. It is a very personal role she now plays for her younger siblings. On a career level this same young woman wants nothing more than to create the experience for others that she had reading Stephen King's books.

Craig related the example he heard on NPR of an at-risk young man who had had repeated scrapes with the law over drugs and petty crime. Faced with no good prospects coming out of a juvenile detention facility, he happened into a job delivering furniture to a doctor's house. This young man was in awe of the home's space and style, and lo and behold, that circumstance led to a conversation with him that led him to med school and the life as a surgeon.

In the hot tub at Camp de Benneville David Sweet, Alma Bruhnke, Kim Pratto-Storr, and I fell into a conversation about how just a semester of biology with a great teacher has provided a challenged Alma's longstanding thought that she would be a kindergarten teacher.

To get our own juices flowing let's create the space to do that. I am going to stop talking so you all can have a deeper extended really greet your neighbor style conversation with someone near you about an important person in your path to becoming you. If you need a more specific prompt, imagine needing to name the people in your river that you had to leap to and stand on in the journey of your life to get you to the you that is.

As you might have seen in the eyes of your conversation partner, these friends, sages, sirens, and muses have these experiences they feel like gifts. We light up like we are about to be given chocolate.

It was Craig's and my instinct that these "experiences" matter. As much as I, or anyone, could narrow down data on this broad ranging topic, the research suggests that there is a cascading waterfall of positivity that flows down from these kinds of experiences. I hope you got a taste for that in your brief conversations.

There are a few reasons these role models, celebrities, mentors, and icons matter as much as they do that might not be obvious.

One reason these encounters matter is because our primary means of learning, particularly in matters regarding identity, is from modeling behavior. In your conversations you might have noticed that people talked about who they were—not what particular facts they passed on, but by simply being who they are. Said bluntly by Laura Garnett in her INC article on Mentoring, "Telling adults what to do is an incredibly ineffective way to motivate behavior." Whether you are learning to hunt woolly mammoth, find the courage to leave a predatory ex-husband, or cure cancer. These people and moments are some of the most rewarding and memorable parts of what happens to us psychically as we find like career paths. Learning skills is useful, growing into a new sense of self is meaningful.

A second reason why mentoring can be, not always is, but can be, is that we get an innate pleasure when we are witnessed, validated, known. Researchers suggest this is often overlooked in standardized models of teaching. We are quite versed in talking about the psychological pleasures of eating, sex, drinking coffee, and other more physical acts, but part of what makes these relationships, mentors, and icons important in our development is that both being noticed, is pleasurable. As, a psychology today article titled "The Evolution of the

Self," noted, "Because we're all social creatures, if you're to feel 'real,' a certain amount of external corroboration is necessary." Being in a relationship is medicine and fuel for the development of our identity. Psychological and neurological research supports the blissey experience we feel. Neurologist S.A. Moreli says that experiences that elicit "feeling understood," or "gotten"—actually a word found in the literature—activates neural regions associated with reward and social connection. Conversely, not feeling understood activates neural regions we know are associated with negative feelings. Saying that is almost too obvious to bother, but let's really absorb it.

Of all the things I learned, this was both the most obvious and oddly revelatory. Researchers examining the impact of mentoring, the easiest label to search our topic under, suggests that feeling understood is a prerequisite for our other desires to be fulfilled or activated. Having the experience of either or both seeing others express a quality of who you are, particularly one you hadn't seen before, and/or actually having a wise companion guide your growth, matters. These experiences that confirm or call forth our identities can be the emotional fuel required for the hard work of change. *We all know that it feels good*

to be witnessed. I had not considered that it is not so many steps from feeling seen, to feeling understood, to feeling validated, to feeling like you belong, and that you matter, even to yourself. One of my favorite quotes regarding the care and support any mentor, teacher, or pastor might provide is "Nobody knows what you know 'til they know that you care."

To the reason the religious right is so opposed to the images of the LGBTQ community is because they validate the reality that varied gender identities and aspect of humanity. They do so in a similar way that feeling like you are seen, and represented being seen, bring it to life as real.

If feeling known, and having models to guide us is a pre-requisite for success, the inverse, feeling "not gotten," psychologists suggest risks making the "hard work always required to transform ourselves" ends up feeling relatively meaningless. Likewise, because depression is closely tied to feelings of separation and estrangement, feeling understood and connected to those around us may be one of the best safeguards from getting depressed. Simply ask yourself how many people who have felt understood have shot up their classrooms and workplaces and you have your answer.

In prepping this I have encountered more than a few of you who have, with a poignant sadness in their voice for the mentors and heroes that were never found, those experiences of their talent or their very being never affirmation, cultivation, never had. I had not expected that.

In a sermon that revels in the quirky way people pop up like angels to guide us. Let's pause for a moment for those whom nobody comes to mind.

The research on the impact of mentoring and identity formation also shows that feeling understood prompts you to relate more fully to others, to show more willingness to be open and vulnerable with them. As Carl Nassar, author, in the *Psychology Today* article

"The Importance of Feeling Understood" astutely observes: "When we feel understood we are more willing to show [others] our true selves—flaws and all." In turn, others are more likely to be vulnerable and honest with us. Knowing one's identity accurately increases self-esteem and reduces depression and anxiety. When people are doing what they think they should be doing, they are happy, or happier. This clarity and peace helps us connect on a deeper level, and be more transparent improving the quality of our relationships."

So, and this is me now. In a way the world gets a little healthier every time a mentor, icon, or encounter with a role model pulls any individual closer to her or his true self. That seems a bold statement to make, but a person who can live authentically seems to be happier, more potent

The best way I have seen our identities of "self" described is as a stable yet malleable mental construct. We are not born with a self to find as much as a self we need to make from what it is we find. Given this, it is obvious that the wise council of mentors can be crucial in the process of bringing this out.

Craig was moved by the statue of Martin Luther King. This thirty-foot-tall King tribute is called "The Stone of Hope." It contains one of his quotes: "Hew a mountain of despair, a stone of hope." The metaphor of the tribute seemingly to serve as an enduring reminder that we don't become what we were meant to be unless we find some tools and heroes that aid us in finding our own vision and purpose that call us out of our rough stones.

Another interesting thing that arose from my research was the theory that our supportive encounters across life aid, guide, and focus us in on finding our “true” or most authentic self. Mostly people’s early identities come from internalizing the values of parents and dominant society, and that those values don’t always align with the inner life of the person. Getting beyond our original identity requires challenge and support.

There is a general sense in some of the researchers focused on where mentoring meets identity formation that the key to happiness is to live in harmony with one’s true self. Some say the ultimate goal for individuals is to develop and nurture those choices that are consistent with a concept that these academicians call their “true or authentic self.” Fulfilled people are able to live a life true to their values and pursue meaningful goals. Lacking a coherent sense of identity will lead to uncertainty about what one wants to do in life. To achieve substantial success in fulfilling our purpose, the objectives must be compatible with our talent and skills (our authentic self). To choose a purpose not compatible with our capabilities is a recipe for frustration and failure.

Other psychologists assume that identity formation is more a matter of “finding oneself” by matching one’s talents and potential with available social roles than finding a true self. This makes defining oneself within all the shifting social worlds we live in the primary challenge. A person may hold multiple identities such as a teacher, father, or friend.

Each position has its own meanings and expectations that are internalized as identity. A major task of self-development during early adolescence is the differentiation of multiple selves as a function of social context (e.g., self with father, mother, close friends).

What was fascinating to me was how nothing specific about identity or the self can ever be said. For neither are we born knowing who we are, with a fate to be carved from stone, or as a blank slate—none of the metaphors work exactly.

In fact, for all the affirmative talk, as much as cultivating a sense of identity appears crucial for personal growth we should pause to say that such a focus on cultivating an identity should come with some caution. In a vain attempt to call into question everything I am pushing today, it is worth a pause dead center in the middle of a sermon dedicated to the benefits of those people and experiences that build ourselves up I will share a summarizing quote from Wayne Dyer designed to pause to remind you that there is a wealth of spiritual caution about being too attached to our sense of self and ego. Dyer warns, “The ego is only an illusion, but a very influential one. Letting the ego-illusion become your identity can prevent you from knowing your true self. Ego, the false idea of believing that you are what you have or what you do, is a backwards way of assessing and living life.” Wayne Dyer.

Ok, now please ignore that as we return to our regularly scheduled sermon.

As I mentioned I began this exploration with the deep concern that we think about how we build the chances these life affirming moments happen. There is certainly a chaos to this very important moment that does not exist in teaching someone to be a dentist, or a science teacher. When you take a broad view, there is a predictable randomness, or a random predictableness, if you will, to the likelihood that anyone will find a mentor, an icon, a guide. However, in hindsight the creation of how this happens is much clearer than what it looks and feels like moving forward. People report that finding one of these people and supportive experiences always feels like a little bit of a blessing.

We do at one level culturally accomplish this. At the highest levels of education and training these opportunities for mentors and allies are already in the educational process. In the preparation for ministry for example, there are required field ed. experiences in churches, and hospitals, and with academic advisors baked into the process. Likewise, In PhD programs academic advisors are required.

However, I barely need to the waste ink and breath to tell you that that level of care drops off precipitously as we drop our gaze down the ivory tower. The opportunities the most vulnerable members of our society have to feel "gotten" is vastly different. Those who predictably need support most, those coming out of prison, those in poor school districts, get less a chance for a loving hero to walk into their lives, or even be in the context of their days.

Sometimes, I think, because there is at least some randomness and magical unpredicatability to how these very personal experiences are distributed, that we can forget that mentorship, we forget that these experiences are a highly commodified quality. If you are a student of history,

film, or classical music it is fun to think about Aristotle mentoring Alexander the Great, Scorsese mentoring Oliver Stone at NYU, and Bach tutoring Mozart in some European parlor. However, what might be missed in the impressiveness of the list above is that each mentor to mentee exchange involves two people of great privilege.

Beyond that we as a culture care less. We don't ensure that every child, or adult, or taco bell worker is not left behind. Like with every other way distribute both hard and soft resources we fail more and because we make that choice, we indirectly reap what we sow in high rates of people in prison, school shootings, and a massive wealth of unfulfilled human talent that never makes the news. You know all of this by simply living. In the likelihood that any group or person from a different race and class background encounters a mentor, guide, or available hero, it is in that we experience a little of the quiet way racism, classism, and sexism works.

Those who need our help and guidance the most are those who will require the most investment and pose the highest risk of little return. In college math and science programs, for example, half of the black students reported having a mentor, whereas three-quarters of the white students did. And partially for those reasons the data reveals what we would suspect, that there are found significant, and negative, gaps in the experiences minority and female graduate students have in getting admitted to programs, to getting teaching or research assistant jobs, and to publishing research while still in graduate school.

Part of what makes these encounters rarer than they should be is that the exchange, the transaction if you will, between mentor and protégé is usually more beneficial to the protégé. Learning how to be a good mentor is time-consuming and unfortunately does not often bring with it professional prestige or reward other time commitments do. Mentoring for many in the position to do it is difficult work and rarely do universities and departments recognize or reward such behavior. As one article on academic mentoring phrased it, "In theory, seeing the success of a junior colleague is its own reward. In some cases, doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, and junior colleagues can enhance our own productivity. In practice, that is not always the case." All this means that the successful people most capable of inspiring other's hands on is a commodity in rare supply.

It is getting a little better, and by better, I mean diverse. Congress is getting tanner and more female and entrepreneurship among women is on the rise in the U.S. The number of businesses owned by women grew by almost seventy-five percent over the last twenty years. Likewise, more African

Americans are starring in movies, and there are more and more female directors, But the *percentage of African Americans who are mentored in STEM graduate programs is a third lower than white students.*

I knew that the more and diverse opportunities we create for people to have those experiences and find those people, the better.

I knew first-hand that mentors, role-models and heroes give us the experience of being able to see ourselves in a new way.

I knew we are sponges who learn who we are, and want to be primarily, by demonstration and modeling not rules and textbooks

What I don't know is how to rally the energy it takes to build a society which ensures that everyone in a competitive society has the chance to be known, mentored, witnessed.

We are not born knowing who we are, or with a destiny that must be fulfilled. That's fairy tale poetry. Most people never find the right mentor that cares and informs them at the right time. Most of human potential has always laid latent. For that reason, this could be a surprisingly tough sermon

In preparing this I was forced to encounter again how profoundly random, and reckless, without an owner's manual we are, and now with our cultures having moved historically from the more clearly defined rites of passage of simpler life, to many options for how to be, having or not having these people, is more profound the need for these experiences.

Being that our theology's high soaring mission is oddly rooted in being absolutely practical about how to get heaven into people, not the opposite, in every conversation we had Craig kept asking how we facilitate this experience. Which I suppose is the turn in the conversation where if Craig is at all going to get his money's worth we have to explore.

The truth is, engaging the most socially troubled and awkward among us into not being the most isolated is hard. Those most in need of attention and relationships are most often the furthest from it. And in a competitive society and capitalist frame that is hard to get around. There is no easy plan for more broadly creating the access to these potentially transformative mentor role model-like encounters without challenging the very nature of our competitive meritocratic culture. Any efforts to vastly change this would demand that we increase the diversity of positive images all people can see, (more differently colored, shaped, and sized models as one small example on glossy magazines), and a re-adjustment of economic resources down the economic scale.

Kelli Richards, who writing about how to find and embrace your voice as a female entrepreneur, encourages her clients and readers to speak and express oneself from their authentic experience in multiple ways to strengthen this experience by surrounding yourself with your tribe, and to draw on your own stories, metaphors and analogies.

If you wish to try to mentor yourself a little and prod yourself on the journey to a stronger more accurate sense of self, a few simple prompts might help. Actively inventory the things that make you happy when you do them. These will almost always be the things that you seem to have a natural affinity for and make you feel good about yourself. Reflecting on where your joy meets your talent is likely to lead you to your purpose. Although this is hardly a perfect recipe, there is in the literature a broad conviction that when people close in on their purpose in life, that clarity brings with it the energy to face the challenges required for that transformation.

So, sadly, there is no silver bullet for increasing the access and likelihood that this random potentially *life-defining* encounter occurs for people, but maybe in what we learned is some hidden advice.

I think that might be overstating it, but if we look at the power of these encounters it is hard to underestimate how many well-adjusted people are not created because of the statistically limited access to role models they might have.

Feelings about the Bush family aside, "No Child Left Behind" is actually is a beautiful phrase that might guide our building the beloved community in this area of life. How about no adult left un-mentored, un-inspired, un-cultivated? As I know by heart and have learned in reflecting on this topic ,who gets affirmed is, if not a human rights crisis, a human potential and human happiness one. I don't think it meets the level of tragic that refugees at borders, or climate change, is, but it could be argued that the most consistent on-going human tragedy is the vast wealth of untapped human potential that never gets manifest, never gets realized because our world so disproportionately cultivates what could be.

In following what we have learned here to a broader stage, part of the advice for how to engage a healthier humanity would have to involve a concern that we spend time on and with people, and work to see that a diverse array of ways people actually are distributed.

Maybe if humanity collectively committed to finding it's true, best, or authentic self, we might be better at this.

AMEN