

MENTORING ON THE MISSISSIPPI WITH MR. BIXBY

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For some time now, religious educators have recognized the value of narrative as a resource in the classroom both as a form for asking critical questions and also for allowing transforming insight (Hess 2009). The “truth-telling,” as well as entertaining, nature of narrative elicits an emotional response from students as they engage the material immediately. Student response to narrative is often more open and receptive, a response that allows readers to be surprised by what they experience and enabling them to identify with characters and story lines (Siejck 2009). This approach allows what might be called subversive learning.

This same strategy might be useful with those who serve as mentors for our students. These busy ministers are often left unimpressed with the texts we offer as resource for their work. The entertaining and subversive aspects of learning from narrative can provide a refreshing and helpful way to engage them in continuing education for the mentoring task. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain (1899/1965) describes his experience of being mentored as a steamboat “cub-pilot” by seasoned pilot, Mr. Bixby. This narrative framework, with its unique and humorous insight into the mentoring relationship, provides a perspective that has many similarities to the kind of “walking alongside” mentoring that is necessary for the formation of faithful and effective ministers.

The Challenge

When a group of river inspectors were gathered with Mr. Bixby on his boat, Twain listened in awe to their knowledgeable conversation about the river. With the growing realization of all that it took to be a good pilot he was overwhelmed and remarked, “Now, if my ears hear aright. I have not only to get the names of all the towns and islands and bends, and so on, by heart, but I must even get up a warm personal acquaintanceship with every old snag and one-limbed cottonwood and obscure wood-pile that ornaments the banks of this river for twelve hundred miles; and more than that, I must actually know where these things are in the dark...” (Twain, 44). He goes on to admit that he wished he had never even thought of being a pilot.

As a learning strategy, Mr. Bixby would often quiz his “cub” Twain concerning his river knowledge telling him that he had to remember exact spots and marks if he was going to be a good pilot. Twain once exploded, “When I get so that I can do that, I’ll be able to raise the dead, and then I won’t have to pilot a steamboat to make a living. I want to retire from this business. I want a slush-bucket and a brush; I’m only fit for a roustabout. I haven’t got brains enough to be a pilot; and if I had I wouldn’t have strength enough to carry them around, unless I went on crutches” (Twain, 53). His wise mentor responded, “Now drop that! When I say I’ll learn a man the river, I mean it. And you can depend on it; I’ll learn him or kill him” (Twain, 54).

The young Twain is overwhelmed at the realization of all that he must learn in order to be a good steamboat pilot and is ready to throw in the towel. The difficulty of ministry can sometimes overwhelm even the most seasoned minister. It shouldn’t surprise us then, when beginners display this same frame of mind. With ministry students these kinds of feelings are as much about whom they need to be and what they are required to do as what they need to know. Giving

interns time and space to reflect and remember why they are there in the first place is a wise move. Like Mr. Bixby, mentors can encourage the intern by reminding them that they are walking alongside and that together they can move forward in learning and experience. However, I don't suggest going so far as giving Bixby's options of learning or being murdered!

When students begin to realize all that ministry demands from them, they can become discouraged. They feel the weight of their educational debt, knowing that the minimal salaries they will receive can hardly sustain them much less pay off debt. The time demands of school, work, family and ministry often seem insurmountable. There are many who, like Twain, wish they had never even thought about being a minister.

Part of mentoring is to encourage during times like these. Sharing personal own stories of doubt and discouragement and God's faithfulness will be an encouragement to interns. This negative attitude often manifests itself in times of sleep deprivation, illness, or stress. Sometimes just pointing this out can ease the mind of the intern.

Changing Shores

At one point in the story, Mr. Bixby was told that the banks of the river were caving in up ahead and the shape of the shores was changing. As the implications of this situation dawned on Twain, he admitted, "My spirits were down in the mud again. Two things seemed pretty apparent to me. One was, that in order to be a pilot a man had got to learn more than any one man ought to be allowed to know; and the other was, that he must learn it all over again in a different way every twenty-four hours" (Twain, 50).

Steamboat pilots were required, by the very nature of their work, to keep abreast of any changes in the river. They could not rest securely in the knowledge that they, at one time, knew the river. The river was constantly changing and to ignore those changes could very well mean loss of cargoes and lives. No one would hire a steamboat pilot who was not a "life-long learner."

Like the shifting shores of the Mississippi many years ago, our society is one that changes rapidly. Allan Roxburgh asserts that these changes are "discontinuous," indicating that nothing we have seen before prepares us for them (Roxburgh and Romanuk 2006,7). These enormous changes call for ministers who are flexible life-long learners. Mentors must demonstrate methods and attitudes that are open to change in order to reach communities with the Gospel. Students are frustrated when they see the need for innovation while at the same time mentors are ministering in the ways they have for decades.

A big difference between the "cubs" of Twain's day and ministry students today is the point at which they start. The pilot "cubs" came to their positions inexperienced, with only a desire to become a pilot. Our students often come to their first ministry assignment inexperienced, but with a great deal of theoretical knowledge. This often sets them up as skeptics rather than causing them to be in awe of those whose experience is far beyond their own. Even though they have little experience, they often "know" exactly how it should be done. Again, this calls for mentors who have continued to read and learn so that they might converse with students about what they know and how to integrate it with the ministry context.

Determining Direction

One of the tasks of a pilot when the river is very low, is to conduct “soundings” to determine which direction would be the best for the steamboat to proceed. The men go out in a “yaw1” and hunt for the best water. They use long poles to “sound” the depth. When they find the most shallow water, they mark it with a buoy. The pilot interns loved doing this exciting work that was closely watched by interested passengers.

Students can really enjoy those times when congregations move into vision casting and planning modes to determine the direction of future ministry. It gives them an opportunity to see the leadership in action and allows them to test their own voices in the mix. The process is also instructive as they plan in their own ministry areas.

One evening, Twain was in the pilot house as his mentor, Mr. Bixby was guiding the boat through a particularly challenging stretch of river. The night was black, but Twain could see they were bearing down upon an island ahead. He says, “We were closing right down upon it. We entered its deeper shadow, and so imminent seemed the peril that I was likely to suffocate; and I had the strongest impulse to do *something*, anything, to save the vessel. But still Mr. Bixby stood by his wheel, silent, intent as a cat...” (Twain, 47).

Mr. Bixby knew from experience how to approach this challenge of navigation. He would not let dissenting voices dissuade him from his course. He would not let his own fears determine his actions. In challenging circumstances, the beginner’s impulse is to fix things fast. The more experienced mentor knows that the situation can be made worse if one jumps in too quickly. It takes mature discernment to determine when to step in and when to keep still. When a student observes the kind of self-restraint that is necessary for leadership in these situations, s/he is less apt to jump impulsively into something at an inappropriate time.

Turning Over the Wheel

There comes a time when the pilot-in-training must learn to trust his gut. Twain describes how “Pilots wisely train these cubs by various strategic tricks to look danger in the face a little more calmly” (Twain, 81). Mr. Bixby set Twain up to see if his companions could make him doubt himself enough to second-guess an important decision he had made. Later Bixby said, “Didn’t you *know* there was no bottom in that crossing?” At Twain’s affirmative reply, Bixby goes on to say, “Very well, then. You shouldn’t have allowed me or anybody else to shake your confidence in that knowledge. Try to remember that. And another thing: when you get into a dangerous place, don’t turn coward. That isn’t going to help matters any” (Twain, 84).

There is that time in students’ lives when mentors need to begin to show them the progress they have made in terms of learning, and that they can be confident in regard to their decisions. In the supervisory conversations, mentors can build interns’ confidence by pointing out the wisdom they demonstrate.

Sometimes, as mentors, it is necessary to push interns into the deep end before they really know how to swim in order to help them get a dose of realistic self-awareness. Mr. Bixby gave Twain the wheel and said he would be back in a few minutes. He purposely stayed away as a strategy for learning. Twain brags, “I went gaily along, getting prouder and prouder, for he had never

left the boat in my sole charge such a length of time before” (Twain, 56). All of a sudden a “frightful bluff reef” was stretching across their bows. “My head was gone in a moment; I did not know which end I stood on; I gasped and could not get my breath...Just then Mr. Bixby stepped calmly into view on the hurricane-deck. My soul went out to him in gratitude. My distress vanished...” (Twain, 56)

Recently I went to hear one of our sharp students preach at a very popular local church. He had experienced much success in his short life and has all the cultural marks of success. As he began to preach I could see on his face the dawning awareness that preaching was not as easy as he thought it was going to be. I saw him the next day and his demeanor had changed. The self-confidence had mellowed and there was more humility in its place. Was he ready to preach in such a visible congregation? No, but his mentor had the wisdom to put him up anyway and he learned a valuable lesson.

Seeing the Beauty

As Twain matured as a pilot, he made this observation, “Now when I had mastered the language of this water, and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out of the majestic river!” (Twain, 58)

As students learn, they commonly become critics in their chosen fields. This often destroys the ability to appreciate those things from which they formerly derived much joy. They find themselves critiquing and analyzing instead of enjoying those things. There is more hope here than Twain indicates if mentors will come alongside the student and help them to relax and join in rather than fretting because things are not going as planned. Unless this ability to “go with the flow” is nurtured, perfectionist task-orientated students can have difficulty in relationships and lose the joy of their callings. Mentors can help by focusing on the positive aspects of ministry and reminding students that God often uses our faltering ways to accomplish his purposes.

Shared Mentoring

As the steamboat industry expanded, the pilots found their salaries decreasing and competition rising. In response they began to organize in order to make some demands. One of the results of this pilot organization was a process in which each member pilot was given “blanks” on which to write their observations of the section of river they had just navigated. The pilots going up the river received the blanks from the pilots coming down the river and vice versa to aid them in their navigation. This process greatly lessened boating accidents with the resulting loss of lives and cargo. “Imagine the benefits of so admirable a system in a piece of river twelve or thirteen hundred miles long, whose channel was shifting every day! The pilot who had formerly been obliged to put up with seeing a shoal place once or possibly twice a month, had a hundred sharp eyes to watch it for him now, and bushels of intelligent brains to tell him how to run it. His information about it was seldom twenty-four hours old” (Twain, 95).

These pilots, in response to a need, developed a communication system that made them all more effective pilots. Instead of seeing themselves as competing with each other, they linked arms

and developed a system in which they passed on much needed information to those who were heading where they had been. Their understanding of piloting moved from the individual pilot to an organization that would benefit them all.

The need for mentoring does not end with the completion of theological education or after ordination. With our culture of “discontinuous change,” like the steamboat pilots on the river, we need “a hundred sharp eyes to watch...and bushels of intelligent brains” to aid our ministry. As ministers seeking to be about the mission of God in the world, we must always be looking to those who have significant insight into different contexts, cultures, trends and theological conversations and be ready to pass it on.

Steamboats are no longer the primary means of transportation along the Mississippi, they have been replaced by trains, cars, trucks, and planes. The life and context of ministry will continue to change, but there will always be those whom God has called out to lead and serve God’s people as they engage in God’s mission. There will always be a need for those who have hearts for ministry and are willing to share the wisdom of their experience.

References

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