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Dear Reader,

What do adults look for when they enroll in a course, in an educational program or other professional development activities? Would you say they are interested in increasing their knowledge and skills? Improving their job qualifications? Earning more money? Or being better prepared for a change in their career? Research indicates that behind these more usual motives, much of the time there are others, which are more meaningful to the individual, even if they are not always obvious to that individual. They relate to freedom, to increasing self-knowledge, to gaining awareness, to facing postponed issues. They also require courage.

In the first part of a two-part series, we address adult learning that goes beyond the usual limits, and the role mentors play in this journey.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"Very late in life, when he was studying geometry, some one said to Lacydes, "Is it then a time for you to be learning now?" "If it is not," he replied, "when will it be?"

Diogenes Laërtius (fl. early 3d cent.)

LIM NEWS



We develop your leaders while they develop your business

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MENTORS

When Adults Do More Than Learn

by Isabel Rimanoczy and Laurent Daloz

One of our central challenges when designing learning interventions for executives is to ensure they will have a chance to grow, to learn about themselves, to be transformed, to change perspectives, to uncover some hidden, valuable aspects of themselves. These are the times when participants really appreciate the experience, when they talk about "Before the program, I...; Now,....".

When adults have an educational experience, it may just result in an accumulation of new information, or it can touch their basic assumptions and beliefs, in what some call "a real journey". This journey is scary; it requires courage to look at one's self in the mirror, and it also requires some external support. Mentors have existed as long as humanity itself, with the archetypal Mentor appearing in *The Odyssey* as an old friend of Telemakos. As Laurent Daloz ^[1] observes, mentors "have something to do with growing up, with developing identity." We can find the role of a mentor in teachers, Zen masters, counselors, therapists and in coaches.

We want to share with you an extraordinary passage from Daloz's book *Mentor* ^[2], where he transcribes a conversation with Dave, a mid-aged engineer he was mentoring, as Dave embarked on the search for a degree, only to discover that what he really was after, was more than learning.

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He looks tired. I nudge the tape recorder closer to his bowed head, hoping to be unobtrusive. It's unlike Dave to mumble, and I find myself straining to catch his words. He still speaks in the same, somewhat inflated, yet disarming style, and the passion is still there, but it is subdued in a way that astonishes me. He speaks to the floor, to himself:

A very, very dramatic change that I witness inside myself. No longer am I boisterous - you know, take an initial, active part. Not interested in that at all. Very quiet mannerisms as compared to very loud, robust type. I have an extremely hard time making decisions that I never had before, even though there used to be a lot of wrong ones. Now I don't make any if I don't have to. I wait as long as possible and think about it. That's what stands out for me.

We are sitting in the community college office where I've asked him to come for an informal, follow-up interview. Dave and I have known each other since we met eight years ago. He stood out then, a tall, handsome man in his mid-thirties, radiating confidence, a gunslinger of the construction industry. Owner of a highly successful small business, he fathered three sons, was Little League coach, and a respected member of the church community. He had gone about as far as he could, learning on his own, and wanted to "get more formal-type learning". With the kids mostly out of the way now, he could. On the basis of an unusually high award of experiential credit, Dave entered the external degree program and became my student. At almost exactly the same time, to the consternation of his wife and friends, he sold his business and began work for a large industrial firm. He felt a need, he said, to "try something with more of a challenge."

Not long afterward, he was selected to participate in a study of adult development and gave us two intensive interviews, a year apart. In the first interview he spoke of returning to education as a way of "filling voids" in himself. Once he attained the knowledge he sought, he told us, he would achieve his goal: "peace of mind".

A year later, though still undaunted in his quest, Dave had begun to entertain doubts. For the first time, he spoke of an "internal" self that seemed to be asking unsolicited questions: *Why change careers? Why go back to school? Why am I feeling these feelings?*

Internally I've been in combustion. I've been - I've got an internal upheaval, OK? Crazy thoughts, a lot of questions to be answered. Outwardly, I've been very, very energetic, trying something different...I've always been in control of my external self. I thought about what I was going to say; my appearance was always right for the situation; I made sure the proper tools were always at hand...and suddenly, uncontrollably, the internal Dave Hyssop began to take a hold of his life. And all of a sudden the tools of the external weren't important; they didn't do the job, they didn't bring me any of that peace of mind I've mentioned so many times. It was the internal Dave that had control of me...it kept reaching out and taking a hold of my life and shaking the hell out of me, OK? And saying, "No, you don't need this business, you don't need these tools, you don't need this appearance anymore. That's not what life is about."

I ask him about that now. How does he see his movement over the years since that conversation? How might he describe it? He looks at me sideways, a wry grin baring a straight row of teeth, his eyes reflect our brotherhood. We both know the territory.

"I'd still sketch it with my old hourglass theory," he says, squinting out now through the dusty window of the old office building to the brick facade of a tenement hotel across the street. "You know, there's a coming into life so easily in the big bottom bubble...I remember in my thirties being very self-satisfied with where I was going, and tremendous energy, confidence in myself, and feeling of success..."

His voice trails off; there's a long silence for both of us. Finally, I ask. "When did it start? I mean, when did you enter the neck of the hourglass?" More silence. Slowly, he turns to me, then back to the window.

"The hourglass? Oh, I guess, I'd say...I've been in there maybe five years."

"So you were about thirty-eight?"

"Thirty eight. Yeah, and getting into the neck, I suddenly realized for the first time what an individual I was. I didn't need a lot of things that I depended on before. I began to question a lot of things that I was always taught to believe in or that always seemed to be right. I remember for a long time in there, just questioning everything."

We talk then for some time about what it's like "in there", for me as well as for him. He speaks of the internal struggle, between an "old self" that always seemed to be in control and a "new Dave" who seems to be more passive. Yet though his former self was more decisive, it was also less genuine, obsessed with "tangible things" at the cost of the "general concern for humanity" growing in importance now. "I was a bastard!" he says of himself. "A real bastard." And I begin to realize that when Dave calls himself passive he simply means that he no longer feels such a need to control his outside circumstances. He is drawing back, making way for the emergence of a more internal self, a self he calls more real.

"Did your education have anything to do with all this?" I ask, not sure I want to hear the answer.

He looks at me, a twinkle in his eye, jaw set. "Well, I'm very disillusioned about it right now. I was extremely disappointed in what I thought my education would do for me in terms of where I was in life when I began, some of my objectives, I mean. It's not going to do much for me in terms of

employment or money, and [long pause] I'm not even sure I like myself anymore."

Somehow I had expected this, perhaps because I've heard it often enough; yet I hear a "but" coming. I nod and keep my mouth shut. After another long pause, it comes.

"The one thing it did for me is make me realize how little I know, how little learning I did have, and how much there is to learn and understand. You know, I read a lot more than I ever did before - all kinds of things interest me. I'm an entirely new person now, and I'm having trouble living with myself. Other people too - my wife and my kids." He smiles to himself. " The other day she said she wished I'd never gone to college."

"What did she mean by that?"

"Well, I'm not the strong man in the family anymore. She wanted me to tell Ted, our youngest, to mow the lawn, and when I asked him, he said he wanted to work on the basketball court first. So I said, 'Fine, but the lawn's got to be mowed.' I got home that night and the lawn was mowed - no big deal. Now my other kids, I'd beat their ass if it wasn't mowed right then and there. I was a bastard, I tell you. My wife got used to living with that."

We talk on about how much strain there is on our relationships when we go through changes ourselves, how hard it is on marriages, on friendships. And he speaks of his own changes as a journey. I ask him what he feels he is moving toward.

"I'm beginning to see the whole world as being relative," he replied. "It's like, like..." searching for the words, "...time means nothing to me anymore. Like Einstein, you know; it's only a measurement of space. It's got nothing to do with beginnings or endings". He falls silent a moment, then grins and shakes his head. "Man, you can go any way you want. You know, all of us, we get thinking about our thinking and we immediately start to judge our thinking - why we're thinking that way or if it's all right to think that way. And, you know, you suddenly realize that in your mind you can think about anything you want to think about. You're a self-entity, irregardless of what you were before or what you're going to be tomorrow."

"Sounds like you've been traveling."

"Oh yeah," he says, grinning broadly at me now, the old Dave back. "I've traveled a long, long ways. You know, my education was like a catalyst when I think about it. I always enjoyed that word: catalyst. I always thought it was fantastic ever since I took a science course in junior high - a catalyst, you know? Something that starts something, helps something burn brighter, or you know, gives something more energy. Yeah, that's what I think my education was, a catalyst."


"Can you describe that a little more? A catalyst?"

"I think it brought to the surface things that were probably always inside me," he replies, sending a chill down educational spines at least as far back as Plato. "Maybe I lived a kind of phony life before; you know, it wasn't the real me. My education, how I studied, working with other adult learners, that was a catalyst. You know, look in the mirror and be truthful with myself. At least I'm being truthful with myself because that's the real me. My education brought out those things; it provided me with the confidence and the freedom to see things as they are, truthful about everything, not hide and act other than the way it actually is."

The power of his words leaves me drained. It's almost as though we have changed places - he now the active one, I sitting passive, in awe before the new Dave. We talk on a bit, and he speaks of his need to make new connections with the world. His frustration now is that he has left the old world behind but is having trouble finding a place in the new one. "You know," he says as we stand up, "no man is an island. And I'm an island. I guess it's time to make some connections."

Watching his lanky form disappear down the hallway, I realize that he has not so much lost connections as redefined them. He still has his friends, his family. They might well be the same as they have always been. But the image he holds on them no longer fills his inner spaces the way it used to. The spaces themselves have grown, and he's feeling the gaps.

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Dave is still on his journey. He had the courage to get through the most difficult part: facing his own assumptions and beliefs. As Daloz puts it, "a good education frees people from their past and from their own cultures, without depriving them of either". There is still more work to be done. Tune in to our next LIM News to see what happens. 

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[1] Daloz, Laurent A. (1999). *Mentor: Guiding the journey of adult learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[2] With permission of the author



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