

## **Mighty Teacher Mentors**

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### **Abstract**

Teaching is about cultivating curiosity, fostering a love for course content, and making connections with students. Educators who serve as mentors and pass on their passions for the profession and a love for sharing their craft can thoughtfully encourage prospective teachers into the field. This article captures and links one educator's journey with the teaching mentors that encouraged a contagious love for teaching and learning in her. The article provides encouragement and practical suggestions for educators that desire to learn from authentic mentors and pay it forward with others in the faith. The article is adapted from a chapel talk given at Westmont College by the author on February 24, 2014.

Teaching is about making connections with students, making connections with course content, and nurturing student learning. Well known author and teacher advocate, Parker Palmer (1998) writes in *The Courage to Teach*, "Teaching engages my soul as much as any work I know" (p. 9). I wholeheartedly agree with Palmer. As a professor of education, and a teacher of teachers, I embrace the opportunity to share my love for the teaching profession, as well as my love preparing young people for the field. I am honored to play a role in equipping new teachers. I am also energized when I can promote and speak positively about the teaching profession.

Each fall, I ask my undergraduate students to visualize their own future classrooms. I encourage my students to visualize their own future students: timid five-year old kindergartners, awkward seventh graders, and overly confident high school seniors. On the first day of school, each prospective elementary or secondary student walks into a classroom carrying a big and often heavy backpack (Hughes, 2014). Likewise, each of my undergraduate students enter university life with a backpack full of personal history.

Similarly, professors like me have a backpack full of educational history. My personal backpack is full of stories and memories of the remarkable teachers that made a long-lasting impact on my life; the stories that I revisit are not so much about topics or content, but are more often about who I learned with and in what context (Day, 2004). Reflecting back, I recall mighty teachers and mentors in traditional classroom contexts, as well as significant friends, mentors, coaches, and family members that have filled my backpack with powerful lessons.

Looking back initially, I fondly remember my youth pastor who empowered me as a young leader in high school. He challenged me to attend a youth conference at Purdue University in Indiana. I eagerly embraced the opportunity to dip my toes in and develop leadership skills when I accepted the invitation to represent my church at a national youth conference.

In addition to my youth pastor, I consider my parents to be two of my greatest teachers; throughout my childhood my mom, who was an elementary school teacher, demonstrated how to live life well. She skillfully juggled work and family with humor and joy. In the same vein, my dad served as a consistent teacher in my life; he encouraged a strong work ethic in his home, and expected my sister and me to do quality work at a young age; whether we were babysitting the neighbor kids or working in retail, my dad advised us to not talk about how hard we worked, but instead show up and demonstrate doing the job well.

Two additional unsuspecting teachers in my life are my children. They remind me daily to maintain a soft heart. One beloved parenting memory is of dropping off my son at preschool. Our morning ritual consisted of giving each other a hug goodbye. After each hug, my son Grant would run to the preschool goodbye window to wave and yell, "I love you, Mommy!" Some days he would enthusiastically ask, "Can we go out for

dinner tonight, mommy?” One particular morning, he exclaimed, “Keep Jesus in your heart, Mommy!” This memory continues to serve as sweet reminder to keep focused on the faith.

Diving deeper into my backpack, I enthusiastically recognize three significant stellar teachers that poured into my backpack through the years. These mighty teachers and mentors shaped and equipped me to keep learning and growing. The first remarkable teacher that comes to mind is Mrs. Smith (name has been changed). I am so grateful to Mrs. Smith for humbly introducing the idea of becoming a teacher to me. As my high school English teacher, she demonstrated the characteristics of a strong, passionate teacher. She lived out compassion, dedication, and a love for her subject matter as she engaged students in writing and literature.

In the fall of my senior year in high school, I recall one morning feeling shocked and deflated in English class. Mrs. Smith revealed that she had been diagnosed with cancer and she needed to take a leave of absence to pursue treatment. My classmates and I were first devastated, and then in the weeks to come, were touched and moved to tears when Mrs. Smith courageously chose to tape record lectures about Shakespeare as she battled her cancer. Soon after Mrs. Smith’s diagnosis, a substitute teacher arrived in my English class, took attendance, and kept an eye on the class, yet Mrs. Smith continued to teach about Shakespeare through an old tape recorder. Although she never returned to school to teach in person, she served as a great inspiration and role model. Mrs. Smith fostered my initial passions for writing and literature and more importantly, she demonstrated quiet and genuine care for those around her. Her model of perseverance, integrity, and grace set me on a personal path toward teaching.

An additional long-lasting teacher in my life has been the institution that I attended for college. The professors, the academics, along with the whole package of college served as a metaphor and powerful teacher. College provided a rich environment for me to cultivate strong friendships. To this day, my college friends and I continue to laugh, pray, cheerlead for, and hold each other accountable. In particular, my dear friend, Anne, has consistently served as an authentic teacher in my life; she is never afraid to ask me difficult ques-

tions or remind me to lean on Christ. She has cried with me and listened; she has stood by me in times of loss and joy. Anne remains available as a sounding board when I want to celebrate a milestone, need encouragement, or even a swift kick in the pants. Author Carolyn Weber (2013) calls a friend like Anne, a “U-turn friend” (p. 82). U-turn friends are the friends that remind us what we need to do and where we need to be in the framework of God’s grace. These types of friends essentially turn around and come back to nudge us, hug us, pray with us, and can even gracefully scold us when needed. Weber suggests that authentic U-turn friends in Christ draw us closer and deeper into God’s presence; U-turn friends, like Anne, help multiply God’s gift of grace to those around us.

My college experience not only gave me opportunities to develop deep friendships, but my time as an undergraduate prompted me to consider the long-term impact I could have as a woman of faith. At the time, I didn’t realize the long lasting influence that attending a Christian college could have on my life. In the many years since college, I have become keenly aware that my undergraduate experience provided a safe place and space to learn, to ask questions about various disciplines, and to wrestle with my faith. I felt truly cared for by professors that asked deep questions, professors that knew me as Michelle, the person, not just the student; and professors that planted seeds that grounded me in Christ and fostered my drive to seek a career in education where I could serve and honor God. In my third year of college, I realized that I was called to the mission field of the public schools. I enthusiastically chose to teach, encourage, to read, write, and problem solve with students every day. As I studied and learned about the teaching profession, professors gave me thoughtful encouragement tempered with blunt suggestions for growth. Professors gently and practically blended the joys, difficulties, and honest realities of teaching, without stomping on the rose-colored optimism that I envisioned for my own classroom.

After college I committed to my first teaching position at a junior high school. After seven years teaching English, I then took on a new professional challenge and position as a high school assistant principal. Steve, a veteran administrator at my school, quickly became a significant mentor; he didn’t just tell me what to do or hand me a pile of files; he took me under his wing, invited me to walk alongside him, and showed me what

was important to the position and daily work of a high school administrator. Steve taught me how to keep the school safe, from checking trash cans when we had bomb threats, to disciplining students with dignity when they brought drugs or paraphernalia to school (note these were often found in backpacks). Steve skillfully shared about the nuts and bolts of administration that included managing budgets, evaluating teachers, and overseeing athletics. Steve modeled how to talk and, more importantly, how to listen to upset parents with compassion and empathy. When we worked together he demonstrated honesty, a humble spirit sprinkled with humor, and he consistently and prayerfully considered each decision he made weighing what was best for kids.

Within the first six months of my becoming an assistant principal alongside Steve, my faith was tested when one of our students was killed in a drive-by shooting across the street from the high school. The tragedy rocked my comfortable and safe world. When Steve and I heard the gunshots from the office, we ran across the street and saw the aftermath. Together, with the other members of our administrative team, we grappled with how to be strong for the school community and simultaneously deal with our own emotions and grief. I was at a complete loss when I thought about how I was supposed to care for others, let alone deal with my own pain and confusion. Steve listened to my worries when I questioned why God had allowed the tragedy to happen. Steve helped me ponder whether I had made the right career choice to be a high school administrator. He also helped me recognize, that although I felt responsible for the school and the students involved in the tragedy, I couldn't control the behaviors or the final outcome. Steve and I prayed, cried, and bonded as colleagues. Our relationship flourished out of a mutual connection felt by both sides. Gratefully, Steve continues to serve as a strong mentor, teacher, and trusted U-turn friend in Christ. Steve's wise example and investment in me gave me the foundation to remain a high school administrator for 13 years.

Lastly, and most importantly, when sharing about mighty teachers and mentors in my life, I enthusiastically celebrate Jesus Christ. Christ is the most consistent teacher in my life. He has given me the gift of grace and forgiveness that remain constants each and every day. Jesus Christ truly is the master teacher,

the strongest mentor, the ultimate U-turn friend. He practiced what he preached and modeled the art of connecting with and getting to know his students, his disciples. "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19, New International Version). Christ loved his disciples, taught and trained them, and listened to them. He also held them accountable as he equipped them to do God's work.

The important teachers and mentors in my life generously poured into my backpack. Over the years, each played a significant role in my story and teaching journey. What does your story and backpack look like? Who are the noble teachers, the mighty mentors, and the U-turn friends in your life? Who among your colleagues, professors, family, past teachers, and pastors do learn from and carry with you? As you ponder these questions, consider these three challenges:

- 1) Stop and look for the teachers in your life. Author Nancy Ortberg (2014) suggests and reminds us to open our eyes to see those who God has gifted and shared with us. Ortberg encourages us to not wait to look and see who will make an impact on us in a few years; she reminds us to look and identify who we are learning from right now.
- 2) Stop and listen to the teachers in your life. Once you have identified a handful of important teachers and mentors in your life, stop and listen to them. Lean in and really listen to them. Ask questions and invite them to share their story and wisdom. Take time to stop and listen to the teachers that God has carefully placed in your life. "But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear" (Matthew 13:6, New International Version).
- 3) Stop and share what you are learning. Take on the challenge to share your story and teach others. What life lessons can you share? What is in your backpack? Engage with those around you about relationships, life lessons, teaching, and your faith journey. "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20, New International Version). Go and tell your story. Teach others about the lessons and experiences that you treasure and carry with you in your backpack.

What is God teaching you through the teachers and mentors in your life? What do you have to teach and share on His behalf? Who are your mighty mentors? Stop and look for the teachers in your life; stop and listen to the teachers in your life; stop and share what you are learning. “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17, New International Version).

### **References**

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