

Mentoring Outdoors

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Many of my ideas were conceived in the open and much of my writing done among trees or by the sea.” My earliest mentor Paul Tillich wrote these words in the opening pages of his book **On the Boundary**. I first read them as an adolescent, when my family had relocated from Duluth to a suburb near Chicago, and I missed the woods, ravines, and rocky crags above Lake Superior that has shaped previously defined my world. In Chicago, I could take solitary hikes in nearby fields (soon to become subdivisions), and trekked the abandoned tracks of the North Shore Railroad, but it wasn’t quite the same.

As a teenager, I sympathized with Nietzsche’s rebellion against stuffy academic classrooms and even stuffier church sanctuaries when he declared that *no idea could be true unless it was thought in the open air*. He may not have been Christian, but he got the point. Truth and Beauty, insight and nature, go together.

The words of my early mentor were recently repeated to me by a good friend and pastor, whose pastime is sailing. And they were reinforced by one of my coaching clients in Germany who is also a trained navigator. He annually charters a schooner to take has pastoral apprentices on ten day cruises around Mallorca or other islands as part of a discipline of spiritual listening and vocational discernment.

I think most urbanized westerners have the wrong idea when it comes to ministry outdoors. We tend to think of it as *escape* rather than *engagement*. We associate outdoor ministry with camps and retreats where we can escape the pressures of daily living, relax, rest, and think about nothing. We do not readily associate outdoor ministry with engaging the truth about life, intense watchfulness, physical labor, and *thinking about truth*.

Parents send their children to camp expecting that they will breathe fresh air, get physical exercise, appreciate the planet earth a bit more, and return with a few crafts. They don’t normally expect them to breathe God, learn spiritual disciplines, reflect on eternal truths, and return with a sense of personal vocation. Adults are much the same. They immerse themselves in nature with varying degrees of personal risk, hoping to achieve a balanced life. They usually do not expect, nor would they welcome, a result that led to an unbalanced life and a radical personal mission.

Historically, however, “outdoor ministry” (if it were ever identified as such) would be more about the latter than the former. Christians stepped away from the buildings and businesses, liturgies and libraries, rituals and routines, to sharpen their minds, listen for God, and discern the eternal truths and urgent callings that had become camouflaged by layers of cultural accommodation. They often found themselves in company with artists and authors, poets and philosophers, theologians and even CEO’s. They tended to gather in *colonies* rather than campgrounds, because the company you kept was as important as the location of your adventure.

My German friend who is a pastor, church planting coach, and navigator is part of a larger movement to reclaim “outdoor ministry” as a spiritual discipline for vocational discernment. He uses mentoring principles I have described in my book *Christian Mentoring: Helping Each Other Find Meaning and Purpose*, which themselves have roots in medieval pilgrimage and the ancient “Desert Fathers”.

Others have been doing similar things. For example, an Australian social worker (and professing Christian) leads pilgrims trekking to sacred aboriginal sites in the outback, and along the way mentors participants to evaluate their lives and uncover their hidden personal destinies. Or for example, a Canadian high school guidance counselor (and professing Christian) leads kayaking trips on mountainous whitewater rivers, and helps “successful” business leaders discover ... and find the courage to follow ... their real and unique divine callings.

Jesus himself sets the example. He leads twelve disciples (and other male and female Christian followers) into the wilderness, up mountains, and into secluded spots away from prying eyes. The natural surroundings may be austere or beautiful or both, and create an environment for people to open their eyes and ears for the first time.

The goal of all mentoring is to help the individual to align herself or himself with the reality of God’s love the purpose of Christ’s mission. The real goal is not to gain sailing, hiking, or kayaking expertise; but to experience the real presence of God. The goal is not to acquire information about the environment, but gain insight into the truth about creator and creation. It is about wisdom, self-discipline, and (ultimately) self-surrender.

Jesus could mentor 12 at a time. We humans, at our very best, can only manage to mentor 1 – 6 at a time. Imagine, then, a seven day trek, journey, or sail along desert trails, wilderness rivers, or open seas. One of the most striking features of an outdoor mentoring trip is the paradox of intimate companionship and silence. Conversation must first stop in order to begin. The labor of the journey ... combined with nature's assault on the senses of sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste ... soon eliminate idle chatter. Yet companionship has never felt so close. When there is conversation, it is often urgent and pointed and always significant. Each day the pilgrim band settles for the night, and the mentor guides the conversation.

Perhaps there are seven days ... and seven topics ... in this order. Each night there is intentional conversation. The conversation simmers in the consciousness of each participant the next day.

- One the first night, the mentor helps the seekers open themselves to the unexpected. Little by little they let go control, and await revelations of new ideas, hidden hurts, buried guilt, startling acceptance, unexpected beauty, and other insights that chip away at our pride. It is the Holy Spirit at work.
- On the second night, the mentor shares his or her own intimate experience of Christ ... and helps each seeker to recover their own experiences of the real presence of God. These are the moments of ecstasy, forgotten and even embarrassing, that we have forgotten or dismissed, but which made us who we are.

By now, every image of nature, and every struggle with nature, becomes a symbol and portal to the infinite. Each experience is a kind of trigger to the memory and imagination.

- On the third night, the mentor explores the ancient or contemporary options for spiritual discipline (including prayer, reading, meditation, conversation, service, and so on.) Each participant begins to customize the spiritual discipline that fits their personality so well that they can practice it with joyful anticipation and relative ease.
- On the fourth night, the mentor leads people through a process or inventory to reveal their unique personalities and discover their hidden spiritual gifts. Suddenly self-awareness increases and people begin to understand why they behave as they do, make the choices they make, and relate to others in predictable ways.

By now, each participant is remembering and evaluating their lives as never before. Regrets and aspirations become clearer. They accept with serenity things that cannot be changed; are emboldened with new courage to change the things they can; and have new wisdom to tell the difference.

- The fifth night is often the most challenging. The mentor helps them discern and confront any inward addiction or outward coercion that denigrates their self-worth or sidetracks them from their divine purpose. This is often a time of great emotion, and the trust that they have nurtured the previous days helps them release it.
- On the sixth night, the mentor celebrates 2000 years of continuity in the Christian community with specific core values of acceptance, and specific bedrock beliefs of hope, and a clear mission to bless the people and all of creation. Sometimes this night is centered on a simple Eucharist or Agape meal.
- On the seventh night, the mentor encourages each participant to write a personal mission statement. It is their unique way of aligning with God's purpose, and it will reshape their careers, intimate relationships, and future living. The personal mission statement is often shared with one another, so that in the days and years to come they can encourage and support one another in its fulfillment.

The companions on the journey part company at the end of the next day. Each returns to the world with a more intimate connection to Christ; a greater sense of self and awareness of ultimate acceptance; a plan or methodology to focus daily life on God; and a clearer sense of personal purpose.

Such mentoring sounds like a tall order for a seven day trek, whitewater adventure, or sailing cruise. Indeed, most journeys like this last ten days or two weeks, and sometimes a month or an entire sabbatical. During that time participants are usually doing more than daily labor and evening conversation. Artists are painting watercolors; authors are writing books; poets are composing; philosophers are theorizing; perhaps CEO's are making notes on environmental management. Any intentionally creative endeavor is welcome and important. No doubt there is also important time for all these people to fish, swim, play, and laugh.

All this, however, is not an end in itself. The historic goal of outdoor ministry is not to come back *refreshed*, but to come back *focused*. A suntan and toned body, snapshots of fun and sun, and memories to share over cocktails or coffee are nice, but the real goal of outdoor ministry of this kind is disciplined spirit, symbols that have become portals to grace, and a plan for accountability that will alter one's lifestyle. People do not return from these kinds of mentoring adventures to make their old routines more meaningful, but to establish new routines. They do not return to their old lives, but return to shape new lives.

Modern life tends to reinforce sharp contrasts between *indoors* and *outdoors*. We separate work and leisure, daily routine and vacation, and "culture" and "nature". Outdoor ministry is a success when it helps us overcome such modern distinctions. It helps us realize the power and immanence of God in all aspects of life, and redirect our focus away from ourselves to the source of all things.