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# AS IRON SHARPENS IRON

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When you look at the moon, what do you see? Maybe just a bright rock hanging in the sky. But if you look at it through a high-powered telescope, you find that the moon's surface is pockmarked by countless circular dings, like round divots on a golf course. Scientists call those rings impact craters, formed by asteroids and comets colliding with the moon over countless millennia.

Let's look the other way, from outer space to the earth. From a satellite or the Space Station, you can see five huge bodies of water in the middle of North America called the Great Lakes. They are believed to have been formed thousands of years ago when a series of glaciers melted, forming five in-land, freshwater seas. Some of those glaciers were a mile thick. They carved deeply into the earth's crust—804 feet for Lake Ontario, 925 feet for Lake Michigan, and 1,335 feet for Lake Superior (by comparison, the Willis Tower in Chicago is 1,453 feet tall).

One more image: the iconic sculpture of *David*, by Michelangelo, that now stands in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence, Italy. The work universally inspires awe for many reasons, not least of which is

its portrayal of the Renaissance ideal of human potential. Michelangelo spent at least two and a half years chiseling, carving, and crafting this masterpiece out of a single block of marble.<sup>1</sup>

So, what do the moon, the Great Lakes, and *David* have in common? They all display the product of impressions. In each case, they have been marked, shaped, formed—in the case of the *David*, fashioned—by things that made an impact on them, that came into contact and made a lasting difference.

### HOW TO SHARPEN A TOOL

A similar phenomenon happens between people. Humans have a way of rubbing off on one another and leaving a mark or impression, of making a difference.

Solomon, who was king over Israel some 2,900 years ago, wrote a proverb to that effect:

Iron sharpens iron,  
So one man sharpens another. (Prov. 27:17)

Anyone who lived in Solomon's day would have known exactly what he was talking about.<sup>2</sup> Everyone was familiar with knives, axes, saws, ploughs, chisels, hooks, and similar tools, as well as weapons such as knives, daggers, or swords. All relied on a sharp edge, and by then most all were fashioned from iron.

The iron of that period was much softer than the steel we commonly use today. Over time, the blade of an iron tool would dull and even bend—but usually not break, as had been the problem with bronze, a more brittle material that was the previous metal of choice.

How would you make an iron blade sharp again? To our modern way of thinking, you would grind the metal back down to a good edge. But that would have been the exact wrong thing to do, because before long, your tool would have been ground into uselessness and you'd have to get a new one.

Iron Age folks used the properties of iron to restore the edge of an iron tool: they used an iron mallet to bang on it and straighten it. In short, they used iron to sharpen iron.<sup>3</sup>

The proverb says that something analogous happens between two men: one of them “sharpens” the other. So what does that mean? As he does with most of the Proverbs, Solomon doesn’t tell us exactly what he means. He just sets those two thoughts side by side—sharpening a tool, and one man interacting with another—and lets the reader ponder what he’s driving at. That’s a very common way of communicating in Hebrew culture.

So, then, what is he driving at? Quite simply that one man can have a positive impact on another man as they relate. And more deeply: *only* another man can do that. Like affects like. Just as the nature of iron makes it the best material with which to shape iron, so the nature of men makes a man the best means of influencing another man. In short, it takes a man to mark another man.<sup>4</sup>

Mentoring is one of the most effective means whereby a man can leave his mark on another man.

Please note: I say “mark” another man, not “make” that man. Only God *makes* persons. Therefore, when a man marks another man, *he is giving shape to something (or someone) that already exists*—namely the personhood of the other man. That’s extremely important for mentoring relationships, as we will see. People do not come into the world as a blank slate.<sup>5</sup> They bring a unique personhood that is already ordained by God. As they interact with others—first parents, then siblings and other family members, then peers at school, teachers, coworkers, neighbors, and many others throughout their life—those people “rub off” on them. They leave an impression—sometimes miniscule, sometimes momentous. Those interactions turn out to be massively important. But the core of the person, their personhood, is already pre-established—similar to the marble from which Michelangelo chiseled the *David*. Similar to the iron of a tool that needs sharpening.

## WHO HAS MARKED YOU?

So who are the people who have marked you in a positive way, thereby helping to make you who you are today? I'm referring to the people who have made a significant impact, a lasting impression, on your life. The individuals who, at a critical moment, redirected your path such that today you look back and say, "I never would have become who I am were it not for that person's influence."

Obviously, one or both of your parents may jump to mind. Legendary basketball coach John Wooden describes the invaluable blessing he had in a father who consistently guided him with words of wisdom and modeled the qualities of love, character, persistence, and compassion, as well as a lifelong love for learning.<sup>6</sup>

Or perhaps, as is the case for many who grew up in single-parent homes, your mother was the one who paved the way by responding to tough times with even tougher faith, rock-solid character, and a ferocious belief in you.

But I'm thinking primarily of individuals outside your family—a teacher or professor, a youth worker, a coach, a boss, an adult in your neighborhood, a man from your church—persons who had little if any vested interest in what would happen to you, but nonetheless invited you into their lives in a way that has indelibly marked your own.

If you can remember someone who fits that description, then you know by experience what a deep and lasting difference a relationship like that can make. If not, I hope that just hearing about it is kindling a desire in you to meet such a person, because you don't want to miss out on a very good thing.

## MY SEVENTH-GRADE TEACHER

Frank Gibson was my seventh-grade teacher. And it was probably destined that he would make a fork-in-the-road impact on my life because by the time I got to seventh grade, the bar had been set pretty low. Things for me could only go up. You see, fifth grade had been something of a disaster.

To be fair, my teacher that year had her hands full with little Billy (as had all of my teachers before her). I was what, in those days, they called a “strong-willed child.” With Billy in the room, a teacher faced a force to be reckoned with, and if they weren’t careful, they might soon have most of their class spiraling out of control.

Now, I wasn’t really a belligerent or rebellious kid, nor was I looking to stage any sort of mutiny with my classmates. In truth, my only “problem” was that I was a very energetic, active kid with a quick mind who tended to finish class exercises and quizzes before my peers—leaving me with Too Much Time. Most of my teachers thought they could solve that problem by simply saying, “Billy, sit quietly and wait for the others.” Emphasis on the word *quietly*.

Well, good luck with that! Give my mind idle time, and I can get into all kinds of mischief. And boy did I ever! As a result, I spent the better part of fifth grade out in the hall, which was the punishment for misbehavior in those days. I suppose students today would think that getting to stand in the hall instead of sitting through a boring class would be great. But there was a degree of shame attached to standing in the hall.

Sixth grade was okay. Not bad, not great. I think I was somewhat worn out after the fifth-grade fiasco. Fortunately, my sixth-grade teacher had a lovely disposition. And, because I was just entering puberty and to my young eyes she was fairly attractive, I found myself for some strange, new reason motivated to please her. Plus, I was tired of standing in the hall!

## **MEET MR. GIBSON**

Then came seventh grade. A new teacher had been hired—Mr. Gibson. The fact that he was a man is probably significant, given that I was a twelve-year-old boy. I had a great father at home. But at school I needed a great teacher. Mr. Gibson was born to that task! From day one he realized that what others had seen as misconduct and “lack of self-control” was actually a rocket on the launch pad, waiting for

liftoff. All it needed was a destination and permission to launch, and the mission would be a go.

Mr. Gibson immediately solved the Too Much Time problem by giving me endless special projects to do—many of them aimed at developing leadership and responsibility. For example, part of his job was to teach us about government, so he had us create our own class government. Guess who was elected president? Bill (I think it may have been Mr. Gibson who from the beginning called me Bill, rather than the more boyish name of Billy). Nor was that position just a formality: Mr. Gibson drew up jobs and responsibilities for each governmental role and made a point of loading up my plate—and time.

He loved music and was a great piano player. So as an extracurricular activity he formed a combo (as music ensembles were called at the time) that featured the school's music teacher and another woman as the vocalists, my best friend on the trumpet and another friend on the flute, and me on the trombone. We practiced regularly and actually became pretty good—at least good enough for Mr. Gibson to book us for a few performances, both at school and around the city.

I could describe countless other strategies that Frank Gibson used to channel my energies into positive directions. However, I think his real contribution to me was to reverse some of the damage that my fifth-grade teacher (as well as others) had done by shaming me for what turned out to be my strengths. (We will see later that most men have probably been shamed at some level for what are actually their core strengths.) That's another way of saying he gave me permission to be me. What an invaluable gift that was! And I needed it so badly at that point in my life.

One other thing that Mr. Gibson did was to have a talk with my parents toward the end of the school year. He was quite knowledgeable about Texas state and county governments, and he had extremely good political instincts. As an educator, he was always analyzing the future of education in Texas, and he could see that the

public schools in Dallas were struggling and would probably struggle much more in the near term. Knowing me as he did by then, he advised my folks in no uncertain terms to look into sending me to a private school that would be able to handle my energies.

That pivotal conversation with Mr. Gibson changed the course of my life. Because of their respect for him, my parents started looking for alternative schools, and in eighth grade I transferred to St. Mark's, an outstanding boys' school in Dallas. That turned out to be the best educational experience of my life, as well as the doorway to the Ivy League.

### A FACT OF LIFE

Solomon said that just as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. Largely overlooked in his proverb is that he's describing something inevitable and unavoidable. Iron that strikes iron hard enough will change that iron in some way. It may improve it (by sharpening it). It may damage it (by denting it). But it *will* make a difference.

If that's true of iron, it's also true of men. A man who "strikes," or makes an impact, on another man *changes* that man in some way. He may change him for better or for worse. But neither man can escape the fact that men have a way of impacting each other. It's the nature of men. It's inevitable and unavoidable.

Again, mentoring is one of the most powerful ways in which men impact other men. So, looked at from the perspective of Proverbs 27:17, there's a sense in which mentoring takes place whether we want it to or not and whether we're aware of it or not. Was I aware that Mr. Gibson was mentoring me? By no means. As a twelve-year-old boy, I just liked the guy. Little did I realize what a profound and lasting impact he was having on me. And in truth, who knows how much he realized the impact he was having? For all I know, he may have just felt like he was simply doing his job as a teacher.

That's why I call mentoring a *phenomenon*. It's like gravity. It's just

the way the world is. It's a fact of life. People have a way of rubbing off on one another. Men have a way of impacting and being impacted by each other.

That being the case, you can easily see that someone (many someones, actually) will end up shaping you, and you will end up shaping someone else (indeed, many someone elses). Again, in a given moment you may be totally unaware that that process is taking place. But I assure you it is, as does Solomon. It's just the way the world works.

## TWO QUESTIONS

So let me ask: If some form of mentoring and being mentored (which we'll define in chapter 3) will inevitably happen for you, *why not be intentional about it?* Being passive brings no advantage. If you're already feeling a need for a mentor, why stand around and wait? Why not actively seek one and put yourself in opportunity's path? Likewise, if you can see that you're going to end up influencing other men, whether you realize or not, why not realize it? Why not be intentional about the influence you have, to the extent you can be?

Most men I know seem to love being in control. The truth is, you do have considerable control and choice about who will shape you and who will be shaped by you—if you are intentional about it.

A second question follows from the first: If some form of mentoring is inevitable, then it seems to me we can do it well or we can do it poorly. *So why not do it well?* Of course, doing it well is obviously tied to doing it intentionally.

This book is about men impacting and being impacted by other men, and how to make that happen more intentionally and effectively. In the next chapter, we'll discuss why that's not just a good thing if it happens, but something a majority of men *require* if they have any hope of thriving as a man.

## CHAPTER 2

# WHY MEN NEED MENTORING

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As my dad stated, every man needs a Paul, a Barnabas, and a Timothy—an older man to build into us, a peer to walk beside us, and a younger man for us to build into.

That’s an eloquent formulation. But if you’re like me, you respond to it with a simple question: *Why do men need mentors, and why do they need to serve as mentors?* In this chapter, I want to build a case to answer that question. In fact, my objective is to show why mentoring is not just good but absolutely necessary, a *requirement*—something that men cannot live without if they hope to live their lives to the full. It all has to do with the nature of life and the nature of men:

- We all grow
- We all learn
- We all work
- We all need an identity and a purpose
- We all die

Mentoring is vital to each of those processes. Let me describe how that works.

### **WE ALL GROW**

When I was growing up, our family had a growth chart on the back of a closet door. Dad would stand my sisters and brother and me, one by one, with our backs to the door, place a ruler on top of our head, mark a line on the door, measure the distance between the floor and that line, and then write our name, the date, and our height next to the line. Through that simple growth chart, each of us kids watched our growth from toddler to teen.

Physical growth is easy to see, and enormous research has gone into tracking what actually happens physiologically and chemically to the body as it matures from infancy to adulthood, and then into later adulthood, and finally into the last season of life.

But of course, people are more than a body. We are also a soul.<sup>1</sup> And while our body grows and then declines, our inner person can keep growing pretty much to the very end of our life—or at least as long as our body (and especially brain) allows us. For that reason, personal growth is a lifelong process (or can be and should be).

But note: *personal and spiritual growth always require other people*. No one learns language apart from others. No one learns values apart from others. No one learns to think critically apart from others. It is self-evident that no one learns to do relationships apart from others. And certainly no one grows in their walk with Christ apart from others.

Humans are designed to grow, and we are also designed to be relational creatures. So when we put those two realities together, we come to the profound truth that most growth requires getting into some kind of developmental relationship *with a person in a process over time*. That's just a fact.

### ***“Thank You for Being a Role Model”***

And as I said in the last chapter, we can engage in a relational process of growth unintentionally or intentionally, and it can be done poorly or done well. But that’s just how personal growth works. It’s the principle behind having a fitness trainer or signing up for Peloton. It’s how the Boy Scouts have helped generations of boys grow into men and what drives the Officer Candidates School (Marines) at Quantico, Virginia. It’s how farmers and artisans and sailors and cooks and seamstresses and woodworkers have learned their crafts for millennia, and how knowledge workers today learn to operate on brains and drill for oil and invest money and construct buildings and erect bridges and produce smartphones, films, and AI. Sadly, the same principle also operates rather effectively in training boys to become “good” gang members, drug dealers, and terrorists.

Yes, it’s quite possible—and in some cases preferable—to develop a skill on your own. Plenty of people have taught themselves to blow bubblegum, play the guitar, read Hebrew, bake cookies, paint flowers, or do ollies and grabs on a skateboard. But matters of character and conscience, the attainment of wisdom, and the development of one’s soul are never acquired by purely independent means.

For example, Martin Luther King Jr. mastered the art and craft of speaking truth to power through nonviolent civil disobedience only by learning from Mahatma Gandhi.

Likewise, Tony Dungy, former head coach of the Indianapolis Colts, who won Super Bowl XLI in 2006, credits his time under Steelers Coach Chuck Noll as invaluable in shaping both his personal life and professional philosophy. Upon his induction into the Hall of Fame in 2016, Dungy said,

If I could speak to Coach Noll I’d tell him thank you for being such a role model for me. For not only teaching me the game, but showing me you could be successful in the NFL and still have a family life, still have your family important to you, still

give your assistant coaches time with their families, still do things in a family friendly way and be successful. That you could live out your faith and still lead a team. He showed me all of those things and I never had to worry that you couldn't do that.<sup>2</sup>

In that same acceptance speech, Dungy noted that he tried to pass down what he had learned from Nolan to the players on his own teams. That's exactly what happens in the phenomenon of mentoring. Mentoring is about a lifelong journey from youth to adulthood to old age. In the early years, a boy is mostly learning how to become a man and how to make his way in the world. But the day comes when he starts influencing other men (again, wittingly or unwittingly, positively or negatively). Over time, he becomes the mentor in the majority of his mentoring relationships.

So, when I say, "We all grow," I'm describing what amounts to a transfer of power—empowerment, agency, competence—essentially a gift of life. That a man is designed to personally grow and develop is God-ordained and the most natural thing in the world. And that always happens primarily through a relationship with someone else over time.

### ***Small Men***

What happens, then, if a man *doesn't* have that kind of relationship with anyone? Quite simply, he doesn't grow. He certainly doesn't thrive. He remains stunted as a person, diminished in some way. He lacks depth and strength of character. He knows little if anything of his gifts. He likely never finds work that fits him. He doesn't even know that's possible! Worse, he never discovers his purpose.

Meanwhile, he has never been helped to confront his dark side. That means he may well remain enslaved to his inner demons like anger, fear, lust, sadness, self-doubt, or self-contempt. He remains a stranger to himself and thereby suffers, and causes others to suffer

when he interacts with them. He likely doesn't know how to experience the joy of intimacy. And it goes without saying that he's not set up to mentor anyone effectively. So, when he does influence someone—as he inevitably will—it probably will not be for the better. Worst of all, he doesn't learn how to walk with Jesus or talk with Jesus.

On the outside, a man like that may become physically strong and virile during his prime—perhaps even successful, rich, and/or famous. But inside, he turns into what might be called a “small man,” something of a dud, just a shell of the man he could have been and should have been, a man who is more existing than living.

Do you know any men like that? If so, pay attention! That's why men need mentoring—you and me included. We don't grow without it.

## **WE ALL LEARN**

Don't growth, development, and learning amount to the same thing? Not exactly. Personal growth and development are the outcome or product of a learning process. In other words, in order to grow, we have to learn. So, it's worth taking a closer look at that part of the equation.

Since my dad and I wrote the first edition of this book, I've spent the better part of those twenty-five years focused on human giftedness. I specialize in helping people figure out what they were born to do and what God designed them to do. Usually, we apply that insight to finding work that fits the person and will prove both productive and fulfilling.

The process I use to do that involves a robust assessment tool that creates what amounts to an “owner's manual” on a person.<sup>3</sup> Among the “instructions” spelled out in that owner's manual are the environmental circumstances or conditions in which the person thrives. Just like a plant, a person only flourishes in certain conditions and merely survives in less favorable conditions. For example, one person thrives when they work in a structured, ordered environment, while

someone else needs lots of freedom and latitude. Some people excel when they have a clear goal to pursue. Others function best when they have a problem to solve. There are countless circumstantial factors that condition motivated behavior.

### ***A Modeling Individual***

Among those possible factors is what we call a *modeling individual*, someone who knows more and/or is more experienced in whatever a person aspires to do. By observing that modeling individual and emulating them, the person begins to take steps toward learning and developing in a particular way. Sometimes a person won't be able to know their modeling individual personally. It's someone they read about or some famous individual they admire. But often there is a personal relationship, and the modeling individual becomes a guide, tutor, coach, or sponsor. The person then makes a great deal of progress as their modeling individual explains how things work; lets the novice try his hand; provides advice, critique, and feedback; and generally encourages his efforts forward.

So how common is it that a person requires a modeling individual in order to thrive? I estimate that in the time I've been doing this work, I've personally put about two thousand individuals through my process,<sup>4</sup> and I've looked at many times that many "owners' manuals" that my colleagues have produced. A modeling individual shows up in easily 65 to 75 percent of those manuals. In a word, it's an extremely common element.

Can you see the implications of that? I've got strong evidence showing that for 65 to 75 percent of people, a modeling individual is not just nice to have, but is a *requirement* to function at their best. With a modeling individual, they excel. Without one, they languish. For some, this need is so critical that when it comes to their career, I tell them, "You're not looking for a job; you're looking for a *person*—for a modeling individual."

## **No Coach, No Future**

Among the most obvious examples of what I'm talking about are athletes who require a coach. Thank God for junior high and high school coaches! For countless young men, sports is the only part of school that makes sense, as many men reading this book know all too well. It's not because athletes are dumb or undisciplined or lack character or so many of the other flawed stereotypes people have about them. It's in large part because most of them *require* a modeling individual, and apparently the only place they find one is in their sport. (If you happen to be a coach, pay special attention to that. You may well hold the key to unlocking a young man's soul.)

I am not speculating or being overly dramatic. I see this reality all the time in my consulting practice. Perhaps one of the most pronounced cases I ever encountered was a former professional football player who had been a legend of the game. An acquaintance of mine had befriended him, and knowing that I specialize in career issues, he asked me to talk to him. So I met the man and his wife for lunch. He was every bit the imposing figure you would expect of an NFL star. But what stunned me as he told me his story, hardly picking at his food, was how he slumped over his plate, eyes down, voice low, and utterly listless. You'd never know he had rocked stadiums with his dynamic.

Every once in a while he threw a furtive glance my way, and as he did, I saw defeat and fear in his eyes. The defeat was the kind of defeat that football players exhibit toward the end of a losing game, when their last hope is quenched by a crushing takeaway or a knockout score. They just give up. This man looked like he had just about given up.

As for his fear, he made it plain that he had no vision of a future. And without that, he lacked purpose. Take away a man's purpose, and it's just a matter of time before he dies. In a real sense, this man was staring at the chilling prospect that nothing else of substance was awaiting him. All that remained was to die.

I'm sure many factors account for how a man ends up in a place like that. But when I looked at the stark contrast of where he had been just a few years before and where he was now, I couldn't help but run a simple analysis: *Okay, he left football, where he was spectacular, and now he's out on his own, where he's floundering. What changed? What's not there for him now that was there for him in football?* The most obvious answer is a coach, a modeling individual. I realized that since the time that man had been four years old, he'd had coaches telling him what to do, where to go, what time to show up, what to eat, what to memorize, what to focus on, what to think about, what to ignore, and so on. Take that modeling individual away, and that guy's life went right into the toilet.

### ***What Do We Really Need?***

Admittedly, that's an extreme case. But I have to wonder how many millions of men in our society who end up getting fired, going to prison, addicting themselves to substances, and otherwise just existing, just dragging themselves through life—a very broken life—get there largely because they don't have the modeling individual they require. And even a majority of men who are functional and holding down jobs are not exactly thriving. Gallup says that nearly 70 percent of American workers are not “engaged” at work, which means their heart isn't in it.<sup>5</sup> It's just a job, just a paycheck—and for some, a real curse.

Coincidentally, that 70 percent number does resemble the 65 to 75 percent estimate that I've given for how many people *require* a modeling individual. I can't help but think there's at least some correlation.

My point is, we all learn. So how does that happen? All the evidence shows that most men require learning from a guide. Instead, we are too often handed information, instructions, lectures, theories, platitudes, gushing praise for men who can do what we can't do, and withering shame when we look incompetent. If that's ever happened

to you, then you know exactly why men need mentoring—you and me included.

## WE ALL WORK

Nowhere is a man's personhood more expressed or repressed than in his work. And why not, since work is what dominates most men's lives. Sadly, all indications show that most men find their best stuff *repressed* when they're on the job. As the Gallup statics show, nearly 70 percent of American workers are not "engaged" with their work. That figure jumps to an astonishing 85 percent worldwide.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, for most men, work is, at best, just a means to a paycheck—and for many, it's a downright curse.

What a tragedy, because God gave humans work to be a blessing, not a curse.<sup>7</sup> The very first words that God spoke to human beings after creating them in His image have to do with our work: "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible . . . for every living thing" (Gen. 1:28 MSG). In other words: Make the earth fruitful. Cause it to flourish. The world on its own is not very fruitful. It just gives us raw resources. Only humans can add value to those resources that cause the world and its people to flourish.

And to every person God has given a particular means of adding value that can in some way cause the world and its people to flourish. That's what giftedness is. God has given everyone their own unique giftedness. One person has a knack for solving problems. Someone else is great at meeting a challenge. Another excels in influencing people. Someone else is at their best when planning a strategy. Yet another has a genius for creative storytelling. And another is the consummate team player.

I could go on and on describing the countless forms of giftedness that God has endowed humans with.<sup>8</sup> But here's the issue: It seems rather evident from the statistics on employee engagement that vast numbers of people are not doing work that they are designed by God to do. Instead, they are straining under the burden of job misfit,

which is soul crushing. They're like hammers trying to drive screws or screwdrivers trying to cut wood, like a Ferrari just driving back and forth to the grocery store or a state-of-the-art computer serving as a doorstop.

So what does this have to do with mentoring? First, mentors can play a vital role in helping men discover their giftedness and use that insight to pursue meaningful job options. Second, mentors have become vital in today's work world. Let's take these in turn.

### ***Discovering One's Giftedness***

Giftedness is universal,<sup>9</sup> but, ironically, almost no one discovers their giftedness on their own. That's because each of us lives inside our own skin, with the result that when we're using our giftedness, we don't think about using it. We just use it. We wouldn't think of doing life any other way.

So how do we become aware of our gifts? (And by *gifts*, I mean our core strengths coupled with the unique motivational satisfaction that we seek through the exercise of our strengths.<sup>10</sup>) The most common way we gain a bit of insight is the feedback we get from other people who observe us in action—people like our parents, siblings, peers, teachers, coaches, coworkers, bosses, spouses, and children. They reflect back to us how they are experiencing us, and that input gives us clues as to what we're "good at" or "not good at," and where we please or disappoint. Over time, we gradually begin to get a sense for what we do well and not so well, and what activities we "like" and "don't like."

All of that is to be expected. But it's also highly subjective, and therefore suspect. Others assess you on the basis of what *they* perceive, but to a large extent their perceptions are *misperceptions* because there is much of you they can't see. To make matters worse, their input invariably is affected by their *own* giftedness. That means they do life differently from how you do it. And that creates a problem, because when someone does things differently from how we do

them—they make a decision differently from how we would or they go about a task a different way—it’s just human nature to say (or think): “What’s wrong with you?”

Given that reality, would it surprise you if I said that 90 percent of the people who come my way have been shamed for their real giftedness? For example, take the young adult who finds great joy in getting things exact and precise—right on the money, as in no margin for error. There’s nothing wrong with that! Except that he’s been told his whole life that he’s a “perfectionist,” that he’s “OCD” (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder), that he is “anal retentive” (a term from Freudian psychology). He’s basically been told there’s something wrong with him. Really? If I ever have brain surgery, that’s the kind of person I want on the job! I don’t want someone for whom “good enough” is good enough, who, halfway through the procedure says, “Oops!”

Of course, there’s a whole industry devoted to assessing giftedness using a far more “objective” (supposedly), quantitative attempt at analyzing it.<sup>11</sup> You’re probably familiar with personality tests, aptitude inventories, and the like, such as Myers-Briggs, Strengths-Finder, DISC, Johnson O’Connor, Strong Interest Inventory, the Wonderlic (used in the NFL), Caliper, and 16PF, to name but a few. Currently, the Enneagram is all the rage among some millennials. Literally thousands of such tests have been developed since the dawn of modern psychometrics in the early twentieth century.

Assessments like those have their place. But all they provide is information. Hopefully that information is somewhat accurate (and relevant). It may even be interesting. But it’s still just information. It leaves the person looking at their scores, their “type,” their themes, their letters, or whatever output the assessment yielded, and saying: “So what? What difference does this make? How do I use this?”

At that point, the person needs a coach. They need a mentor. They need someone to help them understand what they’re looking at and the implications of what it says about them. Then they need

guidance as they begin to apply those new insights to their work. They need someone to help them think through questions like: *Am I in the right job, given my bent? What would be my best use, career-wise? What does this say about how I learn, how I make decisions, how I relate to my coworkers, who I need around me to be effective, or how I need to be managed?*

Countless other questions could be asked. But in the absence of a coach, extremely few people will actually use what the test told them about themselves. And here's a simple way to test if that's true: If you've ever taken one of those assessments, where are your test results now? Do you have them on a laminated card in your wallet, or sitting on your desk, or close at hand in a drawer or on your computer where you can pull them out to consult on a regular basis? Or are they stashed away in a file drawer or a box somewhere? Or lost altogether?

Okay, maybe you're the rare type of man who looks at or thinks about your assessment frequently. But if 70 percent of the workforce is just working for the weekend, I think it's safe to say (a) most men have no idea what their giftedness is, and (b) even if they've had it formally assessed, clearly they haven't had much help to act on it.

We all have some form of giftedness, but on our own, most of us will never really discover what it is or what difference it makes for our work. That's another reason why men need mentoring—you and me included.

Later in the book, I'll show how you can not only gain greater insight into your own giftedness, but also become a "giftedness coach" for other men.

### ***The New World of Work***

Something unprecedented happened in the world about a hundred years ago: The nature of work began to change. Prior to the early twentieth century, most of the world's work took place on farms, in fields, and at factories. But after World War II came the rise of knowledge work,<sup>12</sup> which means work that is primarily driven by

information. In other words, the workplace began to move from the land to the minds.

Most men reading this book are knowledge workers: real estate brokers, insurance agents, accountants and other financial services workers, doctors and nurses, pilots and air traffic control workers, EMTs, teachers, engineers, reporters, authors and publishers, pastors and church leaders, judges and lawyers, and more. Even guys who work in tool and die shops are now knowledge workers, because they use CAD/CAM and other technologies that are information-driven. Same with cops and fire fighters: they carry all kinds of gear that requires brainwork to operate. Most every kind of work today, including work that is said to be “with one’s hands,” such as auto maintenance, painting, plumbing, truck driving, towing, roofing, laying tile, or farming—almost all work involves a great deal more “knowledge work” than ever before in history.

So work has changed dramatically. But one thing that hasn’t changed is the need for mentors in the workplace. If anything, that need has only *increased*. Unfortunately, however, we’re having to relearn how mentoring works. That’s because our culture largely abandoned mentoring when it shifted its public schools toward a classroom model designed to prepare large numbers of students to work in an industrial economy. As the Old World trades and crafts, which were inherently based on apprenticeships, gave way to the factories, we lost the art of mentoring.

Now we must recover it—because knowledge workers don’t learn through the classroom lecture (a model of education that dates back to the fifteenth century). If they need information, they can just look it up online. Most of the real learning that knowledge workers engage in has to do with gaining competence in doing higher-level, more sophisticated tasks, such as sizing up a loan application, knowing what to feel for when examining a patient’s neck for a tumor, determining what the data are telling you about where to drill a well, assessing the cost-to-benefits ratio of filing a lawsuit, and understanding how

to reach the little person inside an autistic mind, so as to build a relationship.

Along with those kinds of nuanced capabilities are the countless “soft” skills required in today’s workplace: communicating, thinking critically, hiring, leading, managing, running a meeting, making decisions, prioritizing, delegating, persuading, handling conflict, navigating organizational politics, working across cultural differences, and so on.

Nobody just shows up to the workplace at age twenty-two with a fully developed grasp of all that. It takes years to acquire such skills—and it takes mentoring. Because most of it confronts a young adult who is just starting out with a rather daunting reality: “I don’t know what I’m doing.” (To make matters worse, he also doesn’t know what he doesn’t know.)

Most knowledge workers of any age who come my way for “input” are really asking me a question that is sourced in the statement, “I don’t know what to do.” Maybe they’re trying to find a better job. Maybe they’re having trouble with their boss. Maybe they need to make a key hire or change up the roles of their team. Maybe they need to let someone go. Maybe they’re just looking for some encouragement.

Whatever the issue, they’re almost always facing a situation in which they don’t exactly know what to do. Well, there’s no shame in that! That’s the human condition. It’s also the nature of knowledge work. The truth is *no one* knows what to do in their particular situation! That’s because no one has ever faced that situation before—not that exact situation, with those exact dynamics and those exact people, and this unique person in the middle of it all.

So what do we do? Well, I tell them, let’s look at how other people have handled *similar* situations and try to learn what has worked and what hasn’t. I tell them what I see when I look at their situation. I suggest a handful of questions that I would be asking if I were in their shoes. And then I invite them to brainstorm with me and see

if we can generate some possible strategies for what they might do. Once we've worked up some sort of game plan, I then send the person off by essentially saying, "Okay, go figure out what you're going to do next, and I'll walk with you as you take care of this matter. Then we'll get back together and see what's happened and what we can learn from it."

In short, a knowledge worker doesn't learn by someone giving him the "right" answer. That takes the responsibility away from him and denies him from using his good mind. He'd rather experience the satisfaction and freedom of deciding how he's going to handle things. But to do that, he needs a coach. The coach doesn't tell him what to do. The coach arms him with the best possible wisdom he has to offer, along with whatever encouragement he can honestly convey that says, "I believe in you."

Have you ever faced a situation in your work where you honestly didn't know what to do? Maybe it had to do with the technical part of your job, but more likely it involved a people-problem and/or one of those "soft" skills I mentioned. Remember how frustrated you felt? How lost? Maybe even scared? And let's say you decided to try a course of action and things didn't end so well. How much did that misstep cost you? How defeated did you feel when you realized you'd chosen a losing strategy?

If you've ever ended up there, then you now know by personal experience why men—you and me included—need mentoring in their work.

## **WE ALL NEED AN IDENTITY AND A PURPOSE**

I'm old enough to have witnessed four generations coming into their twenties: boomers (my generation), Gen-Xers, millennials, and now Gen Z.<sup>13</sup> In all four cases, the two most pressing questions at that stage of life were/are: *Who am I? What should I do with my life?*

Identity and purpose. Those seem to be two of the most basic building blocks that young adults want to lock into place once they

come of age. The feeling is, “If I can answer those two questions, then I can really get on with my life.”

I tend to agree. But alas, answering those core questions is much easier said than done. That’s largely because there is absolutely no agreement on how to go about answering them. For at least sixty-five or seventy years, young adults have been offered a head-spinning buffet of countless options for “finding oneself.” How many of those schemes actually work is anyone’s guess. My own opinion is that most of them don’t, and some are downright harmful.

Regardless, young adults spend a great deal of angst, energy, and money trying this, that, and the other during their twenties, wondering who they are and what path they should pursue.<sup>14</sup> By age thirty, however, most of them have given up on that project. They haven’t gotten very far with it, and time is racing on. So they “settle down” (*settle*, unfortunately, being the operative word), “get practical,” and take whatever job they can find that seems to split the difference between what they’d like to live on and what they’re willing to give up in exchange for it. (Sadly, some also become completely disillusioned and drop out. Imagine that: dropped out of life at age twenty-five or twenty-eight!)

I could say a great deal about finding one’s identity and purpose. But perhaps the most important thing to say is this: people are best understood through story.<sup>15</sup> Every person on this planet has a unique narrative in which they are cast as the leading character. Whether aware of it or not, they go through life living out a story that is still being told—because it’s not yet finished—called *The Story of Me*.

And here’s what I’ve discovered about that reality: until someone tells *The Story of Me* to another person, and that person actually pays attention to that story—not to “study” the storyteller but to understand him, to know him, to *see* him, to see the person through his story, in his own words—a sense of identity and purpose will prove elusive for him. I must admit, I don’t totally understand how this works or why it is so. It’s something of a mystery. But I’ve seen

it happen so many thousands of times that I'm as certain of it as the fact that the sun will rise tomorrow.

If that's true, then it seems to me that mentoring could well be the answer to a very big problem in our world today. Our culture doesn't know how to get people from high school graduation into the adult world of work. As I've pointed out, the nature of work has changed, and our world is still trying to catch up with the implications of that change (we're only seventy-five years or so into the grand experiment called Knowledge Work).

But one thing we now know (and should have known all along). As young adults wonder and worry, explore and experiment, ponder and puzzle, dream and scream, hope and mope, get rejected and get selected, and otherwise hack their way through their twenties—*what most of them most need is an older adult to come alongside them and invite them into the adult world.* In my lifetime, I've seen a lucky few, relatively speaking, have the benefit of that mentor-figure, and it's made all the difference. Most, however, have not, with the result that many have ended up lost as lambs trying to figure out who they are and why they're here.

So what would happen if more of them had someone to sit down and listen to them tell *The Story of Me*? It sounds too simple and too idealistic to say it, but the truth is they would thrive. They would have more confidence about who they are because in listening to their story, the listener would validate *that they are, that they matter, that their personhood is valued and belongs among us* (I can't tell you who you are; in telling me your story, you will begin to reveal who you are, and thus to wake up to who you are and to embrace who you are). And if the listener wanted to, he could rather quickly help a young man determine what he was put here to do, and therefore what sorts of career options make sense for him.

How can I speak so confidently about all this? Because quite apart from the ever-growing research that now exists showing the overwhelming value of mentoring,<sup>16</sup> I have my own experience of the

past twenty-five years with (by now) thousands of people in their twenties—not through some TV show or podcast or blogpost or other one-off medium, mind you, but through firsthand, one-on-one, face-to-face, in-depth conversations and interviews.<sup>17</sup> I could cite hundreds of them in their exact words, but this man’s story would be typical:

Honestly, in high school, I really struggled with my identity. I mean, I was a popular kid all throughout that time. You know, I was a leader. I was the third in command in the (ROTC) brigade. You know, I was a four-year starter on the football team. So I had a lot of successful things. I had lots of friends. But I think the confidence—I was always trying to find who I was.

As you can tell, the man who told me that was by no means a loser. Quite the opposite! He’d been the starring quarterback on his school’s championship football team. He attended a military prep school before entering the United States Naval Academy. Surely, one would think a guy like that would have a lot of confidence. Surely he would know himself pretty well and have a pretty good grasp on “who he is.” But no. Despite all his strengths, all his obvious intelligence, all his achievements, “I struggled with my identity.” I’ve heard that exact same thing from countless young adults during the past twenty-five years.

I also felt that way at age thirty. I was lost! I had been raised by great parents, no question about it. I had received an outstanding education: prep school, Harvard, a couple of master’s degrees. I received numerous awards and made lots of accomplishments. People would tell me, “Bill, you can do anything you want with your life!” *That may be*, I thought, *but I have no clue as to what that should be. I don’t even understand myself!*

Have you ever felt that way? If so, then you know in your gut why men—you and me included—need mentoring.