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# Are You Mentoring for Social Justice?

by **Paul Kivel**

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Giving birth and nourishing,  
Having without possessing,  
Acting with no expectations,  
Leading and not trying to control:  
This is the supreme virtue.

Do your work, then step back.  
The only path to serenity.<sup>1</sup>

*I love my mentors!*<sup>2</sup>

**I AM WRITING TO MY PROGRESSIVE PEERS** (I include anyone over 40 in this group). I want to talk with you about our responsibility to be allies to the young people who are leaders in our community — activists, artists, teachers, directors of organizations, front-line workers — all those who are going to replace us (sooner rather than later) in our struggles for community building and social justice.

I'm 56 and don't consider myself old. I hope to have at least another 20 years to contribute to our struggles for justice, peace, and human rights. But I've also accumulated 35 years of experience as an activist, parent, writer, teacher, trainer and community member and I have learned a few things from our successes and my mistakes.

I am writing about a relationship and a process, not about particular words of wisdom. I don't have answers to all the pressing political questions we face and yes, we confront different

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<sup>1</sup> From the Tao Te Ching translated by Stephen Mitchell, #s 10 and 9 respectively. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> All the quotes in italics are from younger activists who I asked to write brief statements to our generation addressing our role as mentors.



economic, political and social challenges than we did even ten years ago. But that does not mean I have nothing useful to contribute to the struggle. I have a responsibility to think about what role I can play in the community as I become older. So do you.

*I have had many mentors, and what each has taught me is always two-fold. I have learned about experiences of and perspectives on the world; about thinking and doing. And I have learned about approaches to living itself; about being. The former is worth a lot to me. The latter is invaluable.*

Although my activism and community work continues, I am not on the front lines of working with adolescents the way I have been in the past. I used to spend large amounts of time with teens in schools, juvenile corrections, and youth programs. I no longer have the energy, credibility, or desire to do that work. I find that the young adults who are doing it today in my San Francisco Bay Area community are just as underpaid, understaffed, under resourced, and under appreciated as we were. These conditions hold true for the young adult leaders in other communities as well. Now my role in the struggle has moved to funding and fundraising, consulting, program development, writing, and mentoring (and still a fair bit of activism).

I am enormously glad that I have (albeit reluctantly) acknowledged my changing role and reached out to younger adults as a mentor. I receive great satisfaction, inspiration, fun, and insight from the relationships I have developed with them. In fact, I don't think I would continue to be an effective activist and writer if I were not nourished and sustained by their energy, insight, and creativity.

*I am slowly realizing that the absence of supportive mentoring structures for young people in this country is creating a global ripple effect. Stories critical to a young person's sense of identity, history, context, and "place" in the world are increasingly absent. There is also a lack of shared understanding about the natural cycles/patterns/rhythms of life. Therefore there is less context for a young person to draw on when evaluating their own situation...no larger container to take the edge off of painful or pivotal experiences.*



## Getting Ahead or Getting Together?

Many of us have been told throughout our lives that we need to study and work hard to get ahead, that anyone who studies and works hard will get ahead. Regardless of the fiction involved in the premise that those who work hard will succeed, most of the time mentoring is seen as the relationship between those who have gotten ahead and those who haven't yet found the road to success. The mentor's role is to find someone who is struggling and provide them guidance and support for staying in school, going to college, finding new creative outlets, starting a business, leaving behind destructive relationships, family, or communities, and making a success of themselves. Getting ahead and then becoming a role model for those who come after us is supposed to be the American way, something we should aspire to.

This article is about mentoring for social justice. This kind of mentoring is not just about helping those who are younger or less fortunate get ahead. I am writing to challenge those of us who are older to take responsibility to help younger people get together. By get together I mean helping them become more effective participants in an inter-generational web of people working to rebuild our communities based on values of respect, inclusion, healing, equity, love, and social justice.

We can never know in what directions people's lives will go, nor what decisions they will make with our support. However, if we are clear about our politics—the way we live our values in the practice of our lives—we will encourage life-giving, justice-promoting, and earth-sustaining values in those we mentor through what we say and what we do. The goal of mentoring for social justice is to support younger adults to get ahead **and** to support their efforts to get together with us to change the world for the common good.

*To all the mentors out there... What would be so very helpful to me and my generation is for you to hang in there, stay with us when we get headstrong and full of pride, do not desert us in the moments when we need your guidance. Share with us your experiences of difficulty, times you have made mistakes... It is this humility which will inspire me more than anything.*



## Who Me?

It wasn't easy at first to see myself as a mentor because I am not 65 and grey-haired, nor do I consider myself a leader in the dramatic ways that leaders are usually portrayed. I think my misperceptions are typical of those many of us hold. They can keep us from acknowledging our changing role and from reaching out to younger adults.

I have found that the issue of mentoring younger adults is not easy to discuss with my peers. Many of us don't feel particularly successful, experienced, or even secure. While some of us have received various forms of acknowledgment and recognition, most of us have struggled unrecognized, sometimes in comparative isolation, and often in hardship of various kinds.

Even if we are old enough to remember the exciting days of the Civil Rights, women's liberation, gay liberation, disability rights movements and Central American and anti-Apartheid solidarity movements, we have lived through 25 years of attacks, cut-backs, backlash, right-wing dominance and ruling class solidification of wealth and power. Many of us are discouraged, burned-out, or both.

There are other reasons it may be hard to be a mentor (check all that apply):

- I just haven't thought of myself as a mentor
- I don't think of myself as older (or, I don't really *want* to think of myself as older)
- I don't think I have much to offer—I'm still learning myself
- It's taken me a long time to get to this level of experience, authority, status, recognition, or security and I'm not ready to think about sharing it or letting go of it.
- I just have not given priority to nurturing young people's leadership
- They don't have it any harder than we did and we certainly didn't have anyone helping us along the way
- Times have changed and the challenges young leaders face today are so different that I think I have little of relevance to offer them
- I've never thought of myself as a leader or someone with valuable knowledge and experience, so I haven't thought of passing anything on



- No one has come to me for support/advice/resources
- I'm not connected to younger people
- I don't know what I would say to someone coming to me for mentoring or how to create this kind of relationship

Each of these issues is a serious barrier to being present with younger adults and able to nurture their leadership.

With all these feelings and preconceptions it is easy to have two different but equally unproductive responses to the emerging leadership of younger people. Either we hold on to what little power and privilege we have earned and don't create space for them to move into leadership roles, or we give up and pass on the baton, relinquishing our positions without providing the support, mentoring, and resources that young leaders need to succeed. **The challenge, I think, is to figure out how to step back and provide space for younger people to move into leadership without disappearing and taking with us the information, understanding, and experience we have gained over the years.**

In this article I can only indicate some things I have found useful to keep in mind as you look at what keeps you from being a more effective ally. Hopefully it will inspire further discussion and thought and that will lead to your being more available as a mentor. There are additional resources listed at the end of the article.

*[My mentor] has been a reliable friend and resource to me as I continue working to confront my own privileges and the connected oppression in the world. He is always willing to take time to talk honestly about the questions I have and offer his own complex experience as a sounding board. If we are to overcome the many divisions that prevent a broad-based movement for social justice a good place to start is building collaborative and loving relationships between activists of different generations.*

### **Building an intergenerational community for social justice**

For me, mentoring is an affirmation of the fact that we are part of an intergenerational community working to create a better world. It is a practice which builds and strengthens that community and nurtures new leadership while passing on needed skills and experience. Looking back I see that I was mentored by different



people over the years. Their greatest gifts to me were their presence, their affirmation of me, and their understanding of the long-term nature of the struggle for social justice. When I am mentoring I am simply passing on to the next generation some of those same gifts.

*Unfortunately, [she] did not take on a mentorship role for my friend and I. We have often talked about how we think we would have so much to learn from her, if she would only take the time. Sadly she hasn't. We have decided that we never want to be so busy that we cannot take the time to mentor the leaders of tomorrow, especially given the tremendous influence, inspiration and guidance we have received from those who have invested time in us and our future.*

### **Who mentored you?**

Some of us were fortunate to have good role models and mentors in our lives. When I ask people what did their mentors provide them when they needed support, they commonly respond with a range of things from just being there to money, time, a sense of history, inspiration, information, affirmation, an ear to listen, and confidence in them.

Some of us were less fortunate and never received good mentoring. We had to learn as we went along. I think that I have made mistakes I didn't need to because sometimes, at crucial moments, I lacked a good mentor to consult with.

Whether we were mentored well, poorly, or not at all will influence how we mentor others. Take a moment and think about the mentoring that you did or did not receive.

### **Questions to ask yourself**

- Who has been a mentor to you in your life?
- What did they provide?
- How did you connect with them?
- When did you need a mentor but did not have one?
- What would you like to pass on from your experiences?

*[My mentor] would always ask me really hard questions that blew my mind, questions I'd have to think about for weeks, and that I didn't think I was in any position to answer. I'd be afraid I didn't have the 'right' answer, as if there was only one, but he always*



*encouraged me to say whatever I was thinking, valuing what I said. Through this process I developed the confidence to speak from my own experiences even when I felt vulnerable, understand how my own cultural reality relates to other peoples' realities, and realize my part in dismantling privilege and oppression while working to create a more just world.*

### **Admitting that we are older isn't always easy**

In mainstream U.S. society there is significant segregation by age (among other factors) and the experience of older people is not highly valued. Youth and youth culture are glamorized. As we become older we are encouraged to deny the aging process until, at an often traumatic point, we are encouraged to think about (or forced into) retiring. We don't have any in-between roles or role-models for transitioning into a different relationship with the younger adults around us. So we go until we retire (if we can afford to) and then we stop (or drop). Until then we are in the category of "middle-aged," taking care of elders in our family and children, if we have them, but not noticing that we are older. Few of us think of ourselves as old until we are 60 or 65 and by that time we may be too far from the experiences and needs of young folks, or just too disconnected from them to be able to offer them very much support. (Those of us in our 60s and 70s may still have valuable insight to offer). We do not need to wait until becoming that old to take on responsibility for mentoring those younger than we are.

Being older than people in their 20s and 30s does not mean that you are old. It does mean that you may be in a relationship to people who are younger that you have not previously acknowledged. If you haven't had good mentoring yourself, or are still looking for it, it may be hard to imagine yourself in that role.

### **Questions to ask yourself**

- Do you easily admit that you are middle-aged (or older)?
- Do you not only support younger adults politically (in your mind) but want to nourish their development in practical ways?
- Do you recognize that you have something to offer them?
- What are some of those things?

Time

Money



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Feedback  
Coaching  
Resources  
Connections  
Information  
Listening  
Long-term perspective  
Organizational skills and experience  
Political analysis  
Editing skills  
Personal skills  
Healing skills  
Other

We are each still growing and learning. Mentoring is not about having it all figured out or having the right answers. **The essence of being a good mentor is having the right questions and valuing the time to reflect on them.**

At the same time, some of us have struggled to achieve positions of power, authority, status, or organizational leadership which we may not want to relinquish. Some of us may be holding onto positions that we should be letting go of. It may be time to create space for those younger than us. It may be time to assess whether we are in the way of new leadership. Or it may just be time to assess whether we are providing enough good support for the younger adults around us.

*As an activist, it has been exceedingly inspirational to find mentors who have fought so many battles before me. I will never forget meeting Katherine Switzer and learning the obstacles she faced as the first woman to run the Boston Marathon. I listened in disbelief realizing how I had taken my women's running shoes, women's running clothes, and Runner's World with a woman gracing the cover for granted. It thrilled me to think that someday my generation's daughters and sons may take for granted the battles we are fighting today.*

### **Nurturing new leadership**

Collectively, we are involved in long-term struggles for social justice—struggles which may take decades if not longer to be successful. Often there are significant periods of quiescence in



these struggles as a pioneering generation dies off and there is a lack of younger leadership to replace them. In contrast, the right wing in the U.S. is very systematic about training and supporting young leadership. Succession is planned for. When older white men step down there are trained younger white men to take over in their think tanks, foundations, policy formation groups, political parties and in the corporate world.

Of course in our movements we are not talking about a white male transference of power, but the issue is the same. It is perhaps even more important for us to pay attention to the transference of leadership because in this society, by default, either we will have no experienced next generation of leadership, or (predominately) white men will step up because they are the ones often being groomed to take over, even in progressive circles. In any case, mentoring a diverse cadre of young leaders should be a very high priority for all of us committed to the long-term struggle for social justice.

While we don't have the tremendous resources to put behind training and mentoring young leadership that our conservative counterparts do, we do have great role models in people like Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Myles Horton, and Betita Martinez. They are examples of people who have nurtured individuals and organizations and who have made themselves available to numbers of young folks with advice, encouragement, experience, and attention alongside their considerable activism. They each realized the important role that mentors can play in preparing a new generation of leadership to continue the struggle.

We cannot protect younger people from the ups and downs of that struggle or from making mistakes. But we can give them a heads-up, a hand-up, and some perspective about the challenges they face. We can encourage them to develop a long-term vision and we can give them practical support. It doesn't help them or the struggle for social justice if they make every mistake in the book or get burned-out in the process. With our support they may be able to avoid some mistakes and build on a foundation of learning that is our collective legacy of struggle.

The times have changed and the challenges young leaders face today are different than those we faced previously. We cannot tell them what they should do. But we can be involved in intergenerational efforts to build the communities we want to live in and to organize for social justice.



*Thank you for remembering that I'm constantly growing and changing so my opinions shift. Still you always take me seriously and value my ideas.*

## **Getting Started**

Once you decide to be more available as a mentor, younger adults will not just show up at your door. No matter how humble you are, and regardless of your own sense of self-worth, because of your age and other factors such as your gender, race, class, authority, status, and organizational position, you may be intimidating to them. They need an invitation. They need to know that you are available and interested in being in conversation with them.

Let people know that you are available with a note, a phone-call, or an email. Get clear about your intention to be a mentor and look for opportunities to do it. Talk about mentoring as one of the things you do.

I had a very satisfying meeting a year ago with a young activist who was doing racial justice work for a youth serving organization. (I had called her up originally because I heard about the good work she was doing in my community.) She started using some resources I provided in her work and I know she was appreciative of my availability. I hadn't heard from her for a while so I called her office only to find that she had left the job. In turns out that the person who replaced her is also a young adult in a challenging position in that organization and was glad that I called because I could give her some background on the organization and some new resources. We'll be getting together sometime next month.

Don't make it formal. It isn't for your resume. A phone call or email check-in, a cup of coffee together or a walk is all it takes to build a supportive relationship. Just reach out and make yourself available. It will actually provide you more of the relaxed and reflective time that you may need in your life.

After you finish a conversation offer yourself as a resource and see what response you receive. Use simple statements:

- Do you want to meet again?
- Would you like to get together regularly and check in?
- Use me as a resource
- What do you need (from me)?
- Let me know how I can support you



Let the other person know you are available and then allow them to follow through. An email or phone call a month or two or twelve down the road is usually appropriate --you don't want to be pushy. Sometimes you'll meet with someone just once. It may be a bad match or it may be that one meeting gave them something that they really needed and that was sufficient.

For example, I met with the young Latina lesbian director of a local youth program that my adolescent children were involved with. She and I had a good talk about the challenges she was facing and some possible resources. But I realized that what she lacked most was a coach, someone like her but older who could provide support and guidance. I connected her with an older Latina lesbian activist and consultant. They made such a good connection that they meet together regularly. My role was concrete and specific, helpful and satisfying. Sometimes all it takes is connecting someone to someone or something they need.<sup>3</sup>

You may not be connected much to younger adults but you could be. There may be young adults in your network with whom you have yet to connect. Remind yourself that it takes time to build the connections and for people to know you are approachable. The political and personal needs for this kind of mentoring and support are too great for it not to happen if you give it time and attention.

*The most special thing about a mentor to me is that they are someone who has no family ties or official obligation to support me, but has chosen to take special interest in me anyway. Mentors have supported me through failures and successes. Mentors have been my advisors, confidants, and cheerleaders. Mentors have challenged me to grow and realize my potential in new ways. I am so grateful for all the people who have showed up for me. I can't imagine my life without them.*

### **So what do I say?**

First of all I want to make it clear that *more important than what you say is simply your presence*. Your respect and attention tells the other person that they are important, that you are taking them seriously, that they have a significant contribution to make, and

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<sup>3</sup> I don't believe that you should only mentor those who share the same identities as you. I think I can be a useful mentor to many different people who need the things that I have to offer. (Nor does the person mentored necessarily need to be younger. An older person might be just encountering an area that you have experience in.)



that you are listening and paying attention to them. Your presence is perhaps the most important gift you can give to anyone. There are better and worse ways to be present for other people but being there in the first place counts for a lot.

Let them know that you are there for them because they are important, valued, and because they deserve support.

Ask them how it's going? What is working well? What challenges do they have in their life right now? What are they thinking about? Keep it wide open because it is their conversation, their time, their life. You can pursue things that they bring up but give them space to decide how much they want to say, especially in new relationships.

*The importance of having movement veterans as mentors to help place ourselves within a history of struggle is fundamental. How else can we learn the lessons of our movement's past, not re-create the wheel and progress forward? We need the inspiration and guidance that history provides, only our movement elders can provide us this.*

### **Help them see the larger picture**

Just like the rest of us, younger people want immediate answers, information, or resources to solve problems they face at work, in relationships, or in community. First of all, reassure them that they don't need to have all the answers, nor should they expect themselves to. We all want to move quickly to problem solving and to find solutions to the difficulties we face--younger adults are no exception. In addition, many younger adults face strong internalized messages that now that they are no longer adolescents they should have it together, know the answers, be able to handle whatever comes up, even though they are rarely given the skills and support that would help them through new situations.

Begin by acknowledging that, because of their age or inexperience, there are skills they lack, information they don't have, and training they need. Help them see what they do know and what they need help with. You can also acknowledge that it can be frustrating, scary, painful, or anxiety-provoking to take on responsibilities without adequate training and support.

Instead of providing them with solutions, assume they can figure out what they want to do when they see their options clearly. Affirm their abilities, help them see their strengths, as well as the



gaps in their experience, and encourage them to acknowledge the feelings they have about the challenges they face. All of these actions will improve their ability to make good decisions.

Once you have helped them relieve their anxiety you can offer practical suggestions. But offer advice tentatively, with lots of room for them to process and possibly reject what you suggest. Explore the possibilities with them. You cannot know what they should do or what will work best. You can create space for them to explore their opportunities and think about the consequences of making different choices. Phrasing statements as questions or as possibilities makes it easier for them to consider alternative ways of approaching an issue.

- Have you thought about ....?
- You might think about ....?
- Who could you talk with ....?
- There might be information or resources available at ....?
- I've found \_\_\_\_\_ to be a useful way to approach a situation like that.
- This is how I think about it....

*If* you think it useful, and *if* they want to know or are asking directly, you can share your own experiences. You can also sometimes share what you have learned if it is relevant to the situation they face. But do so not by stating “This is what I think you should do,” but with open phrasing which invites them to accept or reject what you say.

“When I was in that situation this is what I did/ learned/ noticed.”

You can certainly help them sort through various immediate challenges they face in their work. But as a society we are prone to ask “How?” before we are clear about “Why?” One special value of your time with them is that you can help them step back from the everyday problems and look at the longer-term picture. Ask questions such as

- What are you trying to do?
- What would you like to accomplish?
- What are you working on?
- What are you working towards?
- What do you see as your role in the community?



- Where have you been successful? How do you want to build on that?
- What are some of the things you are struggling with these days?

Mentoring is not just about resources and problem-solving. It is first of all about genuine connection with someone else and responding to their interests, concerns, and needs. As younger adults in high stress work/community/relationships, they may not be paying attention to some concerns like long-range thinking and planning, getting good support, and self-care. These are all areas that you can help them with.

*The best thing you can do is provide perspective on activism. I think young leaders, myself included, sometimes focus a lot of energy on the little things (tasks, meetings, campaigns) without the understanding and perspective of years of activist experience. The attitude, “As long as we’re moving forward, we’re ok.” And also sharing stories from other campaigns, activists, goals, and victories.*

### **Long-term thinking and planning**

Few of us have a good sense of the history of struggles for social change because of the misinformation, lies, and omissions in our textbooks and other media. Younger adults are often involved in very tense, immediate struggles without information and time to reflect on long-range vision and strategy. But it took 250 years to abolish slavery in this country and 150 years for women to get the right to vote. Most of the major social struggles in our time will continue long after we are gone. I think that a sense of history is crucial to understanding the long-term nature of the struggles we face.

There is an organization based in San Francisco called Generation Five. Their goal is to eliminate child sexual assault in five generations. Their strategy is to figure out what is our work—those of us living in the first generation—so that the work of the second generation can build on that. That is the kind of historical perspective we need to have. We can provide that framework for younger adults from our own longer term involvement with movements for social justice and help them think about their work in that context.



*What [my mentor] has given me is the space to breathe, to think about my life in a bigger context. To think about my organizing and my work to build movement in a way that includes family, healthy relationships with others, and time to reflect upon and appreciate life.*

### **Help them get good support**

Since this is long-term, life-time work, younger adults need to think about how to get support and how to take care of themselves in ways which will sustain them over time.

You can explore with them how they are currently getting support and help them figure out how they might get more. Your asking about it emphasizes that it is not self-indulgent but essential that they get good support. They deserve it.

- What kind of support are you getting?
- Who provides it?
- Who do you talk with regularly?
- In what areas do you need more support?
- What gets in the way of asking for or taking advantage of support that is out there?
- Who mentors you or gives you feedback?
- Do you have any role models who look like you in terms of gender, race/culture/position/sexual orientation/ability?
- Do you have people in comparable situations or levels of responsibility who you talk with?

And of course the obvious one:

- What kind of support do you need from me?

*Before I met [my mentor], my idea of a future was to smoke weed, have children out of high school with my abusive boyfriend and live in the projects. He listened to me and he helped me to believe in myself. He validated my experience and accepted me....He told me and showed me I had the intelligence and the creativity to achieve....I see myself as a powerful individual who will be the change I want to see in the world and I credit a lot of that to the work that my mentor and I did together.*



## **Help them take better care of themselves**

Not only can you help younger adults think about how to get good support, you can also help them get better at taking care of themselves.

Many activists feel very insecure about their self-worth because no matter how much we do, given the large-scale and immediate devastation and exploitation in the world, it does not seem like enough to make a difference. There is often a sense of urgency, a sense of powerlessness, and a sense of inadequacy which plagues our work. These feelings can be coupled with guilt for having relative security and white/heterosexual/male or other forms of privilege. There is also lots of competition carried over from mainstream society about who works hard enough, who sacrifices most, who is most dedicated, who is most radical, etc. All of these factors can make it difficult for younger adults to make themselves vulnerable, to talk about where they need help, and particularly, to take the time to take care of themselves. Since others are suffering, and others are working so hard, how can I take time off or otherwise take care of myself? We are often caught in a culture of self-sacrifice and martyrdom feeling self-indulgent about having fun, relaxing, partying, or pursuing the activities that most renew us. Help younger adults maintain balance in their lives and healthy habits of self-care.

Some of the questions to ask are:

- How are you taking care of yourself?
- What do you do to relax? to recenter? to renew yourself?
- Do you take breaks or vacations?
- Are you having enough down time for rest and rejuvenation?
- What would you like to do that you aren't currently?
- How do work and family obligations get in the way of self-care?

You may be able to help them figure out ways to finance or otherwise resource health care, alternative health options, recreational activities or ways to get out of town that will allow them to get well or stay healthy.

Sometimes, in order to take care of themselves, a younger adult will need to do less work or take a break from work that you feel is important or that is critical to an organization or to the



movement. This may create in you a sense of conflict of interest between the needs of that individual and the needs of the organization. Some of us have the expectation that younger adults will sacrifice themselves for the work, the “movement”, or for the organization. We may fear that if they take a break or time off that the work will not continue, the organization will fall apart, or they will be permanently lost to the struggle. Some organizations actually remain viable by employing a series of young adults in impossible jobs which exploit them for 2-3 years and then burn them out, only to be replaced by another passionate young adult.

I’m convinced that we cannot create social change on the backs of young adults, using them up and throwing them away to further our political agendas or organizational goals. **As a mentor you are there for the individual and their needs.** Let them know explicitly that you are there to support them because they deserve good support. At a later time you may need to put on your organizational hat and figure out how to compensate for the greater expense or lack of availability of younger staff people who need some time or resources to take care of themselves.

If you have been an activist in this mode who was not (or is not currently) taking care of yourself, burning yourself up, neglecting relationships, parenting obligations, personal passions, or your health, you may need to step back and think about your own patterns of self-neglect before you can help younger adults take care of themselves. There can be periods in social struggles when great personal sacrifice is called for. But this is not a permanent condition and living as if it is does not sustain life-time activism. All of us need to think about what we role-model, as well as what we say to younger adults. You might want to ask yourself the following questions.

### **Questions to ask yourself**

- Do you take care of yourself physically? Nutritionally? Culturally? Emotionally? Spiritually? In relationships?
- Are you working and living at a sustainable pace?
- Are there important areas of your life that you have been neglecting?
- Do you take time to walk outdoors, listen to music, spend time with children, or to do other activities that sustain you?



In your discussion with younger adults about self-care it is important to finish your conversation by thinking with them about next steps. What else could they do to take care of themselves? What is one thing they'll try to do in the next few weeks or months? What is their next step? There is so much pressure to neglect ourselves and serve the cause and so little support for younger adults in leadership that they often need to have concrete, do-able next steps in mind to be able to follow-through on what they want.

*Being connected to elders in the movement has given me a real sense that this struggle that I am a part of is one piece of a much longer lineage of struggle, and we are really just picking it up from those who came before us. Learning from movement elders helps people of my generation learn from the mistakes of those who came before us and also helps us think about what we are giving to the generation that comes after us. It is a beautiful thing to know that you are part of a vision for change that stretches for generations before and after yourself.*

### **Keep hope alive to avoid burn-out**

Besides being passionate and immediate about social change, one of the reasons young people overwork and over extend themselves is a feeling of despair and desperation about the state of the world and the current reactionary period we're in. Because of our isolation in the U.S., we can be very out of touch with the resistance struggles going on in the rest of the world, or even in other parts of our own communities on different issues. In addition, we may be working with extremely marginalized, violated, or exploited groups of people, experiencing vicarious trauma from those around us. To motivate others, to capture media attention, or to raise money we may have to constantly talk about how desperate the current situation is. All of these factors can fuel our despair.

Give younger people space to acknowledge their hopelessness and to explore the depth of these feelings. You should not try to cheer them up, but you can offer a perspective based on years or decades of activist experience; you can help younger adults understand that throughout the world there are stories of tremendous resistance, inspiration, and hope. People everywhere are organizing to overthrow systems of oppression and



to build sustainable, healthy communities. Just looking south of the U.S. I am inspired by the Zapatistas and major resistance and rebuilding struggles in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Argentina. In the streets of South Africa, in rural Indian villages, and in factories in Southeast Asia people are organizing for change. I am also inspired by the many organizing efforts throughout the U.S.

Ask young people what keeps them going? What gives them hope? Share with them your own stories and your knowledge of struggles in other places that encourage you. Talk about the long-term nature of our struggles. Encourage them to take the time to step back from their current involvement to think about the vision they have for a better world.

*My mentor has helped me grow and become stronger as a spiritual activist by asking thoughtful questions that push me to articulate the connections between my spiritual experience and my political principles, by listening to me share my personal experiences without judgment or assumptions, and by offering insight and wisdom from her own spiritual and political life journey.*

### **Spiritual roots**

Something that keeps many of us going is our spiritual<sup>4</sup> beliefs and practices. This is a delicate topic to talk about given the private nature of many people's beliefs and the negative feelings about spirituality prevalent in some progressive circles. Yet, for many of us, our spirituality inspires, informs, and guides our politics. It is foundational for keeping us centered, healthy, and connected in our work. For many younger adults this can be very confusing because they are trying to sort out their spiritual beliefs in a progressive culture that generally does not create space to talk about or affirm spirituality. But as a mentor, if they need or want it, you can offer support for strengthening the spiritual basis of their work that, in turn, will provide a stronger basis for their being able to sustain it.

Many years ago a group of us started a group we called the Marxist Spirituality Collective. We wanted to provide a space for people to feel safe expressing both their spiritual and their political selves. We wanted to create a process to sort out the contradictions

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<sup>4</sup> I am using the word spiritual very broadly to include the ways in which we ordinarily feel connected to a reality greater than ourselves—other people, the earth, the natural world, a transcendent spiritual force—whether or not these feelings are expressed through a formal religion.



we faced in doing political work from a spiritual base. Today, most of us still don't have such a space to integrate those parts of ourselves publicly. We may not feel safe about being political in spiritual groups or bringing our spirituality into political settings.

If you are uneasy with or unclear about the spiritual basis of your own political work, then this aspect of mentoring will be challenging for you. I have found few progressives who do not have some spiritual base for their work, but that doesn't mean it is easy, comfortable, or safe to talk about it publicly. First we must be clear with ourselves, and then we can begin to support others in integrating their beliefs with their political work.

### **Questions to ask yourself**

- Do you have a set of spiritual practices or beliefs?
- If you do, how would you describe them?
- Do you talk about them publicly? Why or why not? When, where, with whom, how?
- Why might you feel awkward raising these issues with someone else?
- How do your beliefs and practices inform and help sustain your political work?

I have found that the best way to bring up these issues with other folks is to ask questions such as:

- What kinds of things do you do to center yourself in the midst of everyday life?
- What activities help you feel connected to other people, to the natural world, or to a greater force in the world?
- Do you have any kind of spiritual practice?
- What would help you be more disciplined in setting aside time for these activities?
- How might doing so nurture and sustain you better?
- What might be the consequences of being more public about your spiritual beliefs?

Some people are reluctant to talk about these issues and you should respect that. Others will be only too glad to have someone to explore this area of their life with--someone who will listen respectfully and non-judgmentally. Use your own judgment about how to proceed, paying close attention to the other person's



responses, as well as to your own level of comfort with talking about spirituality.

*Even younger activists have all these expectations that if we want justice, then we should have justice everywhere we are – particularly our organizations and if we don't then we have only ourselves to blame rather than the material conditions we live in. Helping younger activists develop a complex analysis is critical and helping younger generation leaders deal with these issues and not end up hating themselves for not being able to “transcend” would be really helpful.*

### **Affirm and celebrate their successes**

Giving enthusiastic positive feedback is easy to do but is often neglected by mentors. Many younger adults are in work situations where they receive little positive feedback or encouragement. I think it is very important for mentors to give lots and lots of positive feedback. Being seen and recognized for what they do keeps people going. It allows them to take criticism and to support others. Try to make it a regular practice to notice the successes and achievements of the person you are talking with and tell them about it. If you meet with someone over time you are in a good position to see much more clearly than they the growth, skills, or maturity they are gaining.

You'll develop your own style of giving positive feedback using phrases such as

- I really appreciate how much you have learned to [perform this skill]
- Have you noticed how you are now able to....
- Remember how daunting that ... used to be for you.
- It's great that you were able to....
- Congratulations, that's quite an accomplishment.
- I really see you becoming more mature in your decisions/choices/relationships/etc.
- That was quite a challenge you handled successfully.
- You are amazing in your ability to ...

There are numerous ways to affirm another person. Unfortunately, many of us come from families, school and work experiences and relationships in which we did not receive a lot of affirmation. There is also a culture among progressives of doom and gloom and



often an inability or unwillingness to celebrate victories. All of these factors may make us unused to affirming others or uncomfortable acknowledging success.

At first you may find it awkward to give genuine praise and affirmation. Keep at it. Learn to notice the positive. Don't neglect this crucial part of being a mentor.

And while you are at it, tell others to do it too. Point out the accomplishments of the younger adults around you to your peers. When you introduce younger adults or talk about them in public acknowledge their contributions. Praise their work and their ideas. Public appreciation brings attention to the vital impact that younger people have and it helps build a culture of mutual caring and affirmation. By expressing appreciation you also become a role model for your peers, encouraging them to notice and acknowledge the contributions of younger people.

*Help those being mentored to figure out tangible ways to love themselves while still recognizing mistakes, weaknesses and problems.*

### **Giving critical feedback**

Giving critical feedback to someone can sometimes be even more difficult than affirming their achievements. Yet when we notice dysfunctional or ineffective habits or behavior in a younger adult we are mentoring, we have to be able to give challenging feedback about what we see. This is never an easy task. Let them know that you are there as their ally ready to help them figure out difficult problems. I think it helps to frame feedback within the positive skills and experience that the person has. Then you can point out an area that you think needs some attention, reassuring them that we each have areas that we struggle with. You can start sentences with phrases such as

“I think you are doing really well in general. I have noticed, though, that one area that gives you problems is....” Or

“Overall you are handling a lot of difficult challenges which would be a difficult for anyone. One issue (setting personal limits, taking care of yourself, getting support, balancing fundraising and program work, supervising staff) seems to come up regularly in our discussions as a challenge for you. What gets hard and what things might make a difference here?” Or



“Even though your work situation is going well overall, let’s talk about how you handle....”

Listen carefully to the response you receive and decide if it is useful to continue talking about this issue. Sometimes it is too painful or embarrassing. Other times the person will be relieved that you mentioned it and all too glad to have some help sorting out alternatives.

Often critical feedback can be phrased as questions about alternatives. Examples would be, “I noticed that you spend most of your fundraising time writing grant proposals, how can you balance that against doing some major donor work?” or “You seem to have a tight group of people who are advising you on this project but I wonder if it would be worthwhile to get perspectives from a couple of people outside the network?”

*Don’t be afraid to actually have concrete suggestions or answers to things. The asking of questions to help others think is key to mentoring, but also having real answer to questions when you have them can be helpful. It’s crucial to be complex about your delivery and general approach when giving answers...The thinking behind things is generally more important than the end response itself, if your goal is to help someone think for themselves and develop understanding.*

### **Provide practical support when you can**

Besides general time to reflect on their life and situation, younger adults sometimes need support with very practical issues. They may need help negotiating salaries and working conditions with the organization they work for. They may need help setting limits on demands for their time or energy. They may need specific information about legal issues, financial issues, or organizational issues they face. If you have the information they are looking for, share it. If you don’t, you can help them identify what kind of information they need and you may be able to connect them to individuals or organizations that can provide it. Your responsibility is not to know everything but to help them figure out how to find and use the resources that are available.

*Many of us end up in leadership positions but don’t get much training in effective supervision or staff development. It’s really*



*great if older, seasoned activists can put in the time to help us work through a particular problem or challenge. Practical ideas of what we might try in a given situation are especially helpful (of course only if such advice is solicited).*

### **Pay attention to transitions**

Often young people step into new levels of leadership and don't bring all the skills, knowledge, information, or training they need. This is a particularly important time for older adults to be there as resources for them. Try and notice when these transitions happen and reach out to offer support. Sometimes people in transitions will need help with specific skills like organizing a press conference, calling donors, supervising staff, or creating a budget. Ask them about what skills or training they have, which they need, and where they might get them. Emphasize that they are facing new challenges and of course they deserve to have the training they need to do their work well. Sometimes their need is broader and they need support from someone who faces the same kinds of challenges they do at the moment. Perhaps you can connect them to someone in a similar situation. You may even be able to help them pull together a support group.

At one point in our area a couple of us realized that there were a lot of younger adults who were working with teens and were indicating that they felt isolated and unable to learn from each other's experiences. We were able to find a little bit of money to pay one of them to organize a younger adult support network that met every couple of months for a while. This enabled them to find each other (we helped them identify younger adults in the community who might be interested) and to create a supportive network. The relationships built through those gatherings continue to be a nexus of friendship, support, and activism 4-5 years later.

*Mentors have played an important role in my life, particularly as I have surpassed the education level (high school) of my parents and moved 250 miles away to college and eventually thousands of miles from home seeking to learn more about the world.*

### **Younger adults from marginal groups**

Many of the younger adults you mentor will probably be part of non-dominant groups in our society. Young people of color, young women, young lgbtqq folks, young Jews, young people from low-



income background or those with poor educational backgrounds or who have disabilities face serious and unique challenges in taking on leadership. I think a mentor has two responsibilities in this case.

The first responsibility is to help the young person understand and respond to the various kinds of discrimination, exclusion, isolation, lack of acknowledgment, and invisibility they may face in organizational and social contexts where they are part of a less-powerful minority. For example, I may ask a young person of color how racism is affecting them at work, or a young Jew how anti-Semitism manifests in their organization, or a young person from a low-income background how classism is manifest in their co-workers. I usually ask this more as a question such as “Do you think racism might be a factor in the challenges you face?” I always assume that these issues are there. If the person I’m talking with doesn’t immediately acknowledge them, they may well come back to our next meeting and say something like “Last time we met you mentioned anti-Semitism. Although I couldn’t think of anything at the time, since then I’ve been noticing some things that I’d like to talk about.”

The second responsibility of a mentor in this situation is to provide a referral or link with another mentor. If you do not share the particular form of marginalization with the person you are talking with, can you help them connect with someone who does, someone who might have greater insight and experience in dealing with the issues of sexism, racism, disability, etc. that they face. I am not suggesting that you cannot be a good mentor for this person but a part of your mentoring should include helping younger adults find the full range of mentoring experience and role models they need.

*It can be really useful for a mentor to talk about how they deal with their own privileges in this society and try to be open about their own process dealing with it and working on it. Again, modeling a self-loving approach is really important, not just in what you say, but in how you are.*

### **Younger adults from privileged groups**

Many of the same young adults you mentor will also be part of privileged groups. Just being a resident of the U.S. makes most of us privileged, not to mention the various forms of gender, race, class, ability, and educational privilege many people have. Helping



younger adults identify and hold responsibly the various kinds of social privilege they have is another challenge for a mentor. You can only help others deal with privilege if you have done your own personal work on these issues.

### **Questions to ask yourself**

- What kinds of social, political, and economic privilege do you enjoy in your life?
- Are you clear about how they operate?
- Which ones haven't you looked at carefully?
- What kinds of things do you do to use your privilege for the advantage of the community?
- What is your next step in dealing with issues of your own privilege?

Because younger adults are struggling to be effective and successful in their work, and because many of them have defined themselves by identities of oppression, it can be difficult for them to acknowledge, much less understand, how privilege operates to their advantage. People often rank their own oppression as much more severe than other issues because for them it is a survival issue and on other issues they live in a culture of normality and power. For example, as a Jewish person I am very sensitive to anti-Jewish oppression but much less aware of the respect, access, and personal effectiveness I benefit from as an able-bodied person. Any system in which we are not personally targeted for exploitation and violence will seem less important to us even though it is not less devastating to those who are targeted by it.

You can help younger adults notice the privilege they enjoy and how it might limit the effectiveness of the work that they do. Since privilege works systematically, operating through the policies and practices of institutions and organizations, it is important to help them move past feelings of guilt, shame, or embarrassment and towards holding their privilege responsibly, sharing the time, money, connections, resources, or other opportunities they have access to.

Whenever appropriate, ask questions about how white, male, economic, heterosexual, or other forms of privilege are operating in their lives. At the same time, you can share your own understanding of how they operate in your life to create safety for exploring these issues together.



*Mentoring is by no means a one-way “I’m helping you” street. I live in a world where “Your Struggle IS My Struggle” and this theme, I believe, belongs to all of us. If we intend on building true community, it must be done with love, open communication and mutuality with all the textures and complexities of such a beautiful relationship.*

## **Mutuality**

Many of the models we have for mentoring come from work or educational contexts and involve a one-way relationship. One person, usually older, has experience and expertise to pass to the other. But learning and growth that is empowering develops out of relationships based on mutual respect and common concern.

Mentoring for social justice should be a two-way relationship. Building an intergenerational community involves creating bonds that are mutual, respectful, and reciprocal. We are each learning and growing, having skills and experience in one area and lacking them in others. We need each other’s support.

Don’t put yourself (or let yourself be put) on a pedestal. Don’t assume that you have the most experience or insight into an issue. You have much to learn from those you mentor. Younger adults have access to resources, ideas, feedback, and experiences from different times and contexts than you do. Ask for their advice and suggestions, accept their encouragement and appreciation, and acknowledge what you value from them.

While working on this article I asked for feedback from several younger adults that I meet with. I not only received encouragement about the article and appreciation for being invited into the project, but also lots of specific and very helpful ideas and criticism. Nothing breaks down the formality and artificial distinctions between a mentor and another person better than working together on common projects whether they are yours, theirs, or community-based.

*The people who have and do mentor me are amazing folks. I’ve noticed that I sometimes hold them to unfairly high standards, which can lead me to feel disappointed when they make understandable mistakes or set boundaries that challenge me. Thank you for your patience, it has helped me cultivate more for myself and other people, and see you as the full person that you are.*



## **Boundary issues**

Mentoring relationships can take many different forms and involve varying degrees of relationship. Some can be social as well as mentor focused. However it is the absolute responsibility of the mentor to maintain emotional and sexual boundaries at all times. Being older, more experienced, attentive and understanding to a younger person can be misused as an excuse for emotional and sexual exploitation, particularly (but not only) if the mentor is male and the younger adult is female. It is not appropriate for this relationship to involve any kind of sexual activity. Nor do I think it appropriate for the younger adult to take care of the emotional needs of the mentor. Mentors should get their emotional needs met elsewhere so that the person being mentored does not have to balance their needs against the needs of the mentor. Although mentoring creates a mutual relationship, the primary goal is to support the younger adult being mentored. There can be reciprocity in the relationship, mutual sharing, and informal social activities. But as the mentor, you are responsible for maintaining the non-exploitive nature of the relationship, even if the other person wants more intimacy than is appropriate.

It may also happen that a younger adult is being or has been sexually harassed or abused and looks to you for a “safe” intimate relationship. Proceeding on this basis would not be healthy for either of you. It would be more helpful to discontinue the relationship than participate in one built on abuse of power past or present. If you feel that this may be or has become a problem you should step back from the relationship and talk with a peer who has experience in this area.

One way to keep boundaries clear is to think about where and when you meet with someone. Is it a formal space such as an office, a neutral space such as a coffee shop or park, or a personal space such as a home? If you meet at night is it at a cultural or political event or at a bar? How do you choose where and when to meet? What are the messages and implications for you and for the other person?

There may be occasions where the person you are mentoring needs assistance in dealing with someone who is harassing them. You can help them sort out their alternatives in handling a situation of abuse and getting the support they need. Conversely, you may be mentor to someone who is acting inappropriately with younger staff or colleagues. If, for example, a



35-year-old you are mentoring begins or talks about an intimate relationship with a new 24-year-old staff person you may need to challenge the appropriateness of their actions.

There are non-sexual boundary issues to consider as well. What are appropriate limits on the amount of time, energy, or attention you would give to a person you mentor? When can they call and when are you not available? Would you loan them money if they needed some? If so, how much?

These kinds of boundary issues are complex. You will have to talk with others and use your best judgment about what you say or don't say, advise or don't advise, provide or don't provide. But being aware that these issues can and do come up may allow you to notice the covert signs that a boundary has been crossed and needs to be dealt with.

A final issue that touches on boundaries is credit for joint work, work on joint projects, or credit for ideas. There is never enough credit, public acknowledgment, recognition, and honoring of people's contributions in progressive circles. Sometimes we will find in ourselves or encounter in others a scarcity mentality about public recognition. We may become angry or jealous of someone who claims or uses material we consider ours, even though we initially shared it with them. At other times there may be competition over who developed an idea and who can claim credit for it. Obviously this can become an issue between peers and co-workers as well. But in the context of mentoring it is important that you be clear about ideas, exercises, or other materials that you have developed and want to retain control over, and those that are in the public domain and available to everyone. It is also important that the resources that you use or develop that contain contributions from people you mentor are fully acknowledged and your use of them mutually agreed on.

Boundaries are fluid and negotiable, but they need to be maintained. If you think that appropriate boundaries are being crossed, sometimes you can check in with the person you are mentoring. More often, however, I have found it useful to check in with someone else who is not involved in the relationship and to ask them about what they think is appropriate behavior in this situation. When we are mentoring someone we like a lot as a person it can be hard for us to see where they or we are overstepping good boundaries in the relationship. It often helps to have an opinion from a more objective person.



*All of us have a responsibility to collectively help raise up our community. Doing so thoughtfully with respect to differences in power such as age, race-ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, legal-immigration status, language, etc. is part of what it means to effectively support one another. Extending one's support to a mentee must be done with an eye on why you are doing what you are doing, as well as what is actually supportive to the mentee (as opposed to what you think the mentee needs).*

### **It is difficult to measure your impact**

You may never know the results of some of your mentoring. In this way, being a mentor is like being a teacher. Only a few students ever come back and tell you what a difference you made in their lives. You probably affect many more than you realize. However, I've found that many younger adults are appreciative of my time and support and they let me know it in various ways. If you are unsure you can always ask them if your time with them is useful.

I also think it is important not to claim a person as someone you mentor. Let the other person acknowledge it if they want to, if they see it that way. I know younger adults who felt disrespected because someone claimed to be their mentor and I know people who claim to be mentoring people who are not really doing so. You should be receiving satisfaction from your relationships with younger adults and you should be checking to see that you are actually supporting them in ways they want. But don't get caught up in claiming them in conversation with others. I think that mentoring is a personal and confidential relationship unless the person being mentored wants to acknowledge it publicly.

Finally, confidentiality is also crucial to maintain for your conversations with young people. Everything that a person you are mentoring says to you should be completely confidential. In order for them to be able to be vulnerable and to talk about the challenges in their work and non-work lives they need to be able to trust you not to pass on thoughts and feelings they share with you. I don't think there should be any exceptions to this unless you have explicit permission from them to share particular information with specific people. Mentoring is about their life and they, not you, get to decide what is public and what is not.

On the other hand, we need to develop more of an explicit culture of mentoring so if there are people who have mentored you,



let them know you appreciate them and let others know what they provided you.

*As a young adult, the support of a more experienced person who affirms my legitimacy as an activist and values my contributions makes such a huge positive difference in my energy level and desire to continue the work.*

### **Advocate for younger adults**

Our support for younger adult leaders should continue beyond our one-to-one relationship with them. You may be in an organizational position as a manager, board member, advisor, or community representative where you can influence decisions that affect younger adults. Advocate for adequate salaries and benefits, necessary training, effective supervision, and visible appreciation for their contributions.

Whenever you're in a meeting, or event, or discussion in which the interests of younger adults are at stake and yet young people are absent (as is often the case) you can be asking why there is no younger representation. You can push for the inclusion of not just one or two as tokens, but of enough young people for serious participation. You can also speak up for their interests so that they are taken into account when decisions are made.

Talk with older adults about how to support younger leaders. Make it an organizational priority. Build it into the programming. And, whenever necessary, interrupt your peers when they are ignoring, disparaging, exploiting, or dismissing the leadership of younger adults.

### **Younger adults can be mentors too**

There is good reason to start people in the practice of mentoring from early on as a form of community service and community building. It strengthens the fabric of our community and enhances our lives. We live in an interconnected web of mutuality to paraphrase M.L. King Jr. Sixth graders can mentor first graders, high school students can mentor middle schoolers, young adults can mentor teens, and older adults can mentor younger ones. There is no age that is too early to start and no age too old. We all need support, advice, and connection. We can all pass on what we know to those younger. Encourage the younger adults you mentor to think about who they can support and encourage. Help them see



that they have valuable skills and experience that others can benefit from. For some of us, mentoring is only something we come to as we become older. But there is no good reason why it shouldn't be built into all stages of our lives.

*We all have a lot to learn and if we're not passing on our lessons we are losing parts of our collective struggle.*

The struggle for social justice is ongoing and long-term. We need each other across generations. Together we can build a strong, intergenerational culture of mutual support, struggle, and appreciation. Younger adults are as eager to participate in that as we older folks are. It is time to step forward.

### **Questions to ask yourself**

- What is your next step in being a more powerful mentor to younger adults?
- What is something specific you are going to do to make it happen?

I'd like to end this article with a few lines from "Ella's Song" by Bernice Johnson Reagon written to celebrate the important mentoring work that Ella Baker did for young people in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>5</sup>

We who believe in freedom cannot rest,  
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.  
Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons,  
Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons,  
That which touches me most is that I had a chance to work with people,  
Passing on to others that which was passed on to me,...

The older I get, the better I know that the secret of my going on  
Is when the reins are in the hands of the young who dare to run against the storm,  
Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me,  
I need to be one in the number, as we stand against tyranny..."

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<sup>5</sup> Ella's Song © Sweet Honey in the Rock



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## Resources

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Flaherty, James. *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others*. Oxford: Betterworth-Heinemann, 1999.

Horwitz, Claudia. *The Spiritual Activist: Practices to Transform Your Life, Your Work, and Your World*. New York: Penguin Compass, 2002.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to [pkivel@mindspring.com](mailto:pkivel@mindspring.com).

Further resources are available at [www.paulkivel.com](http://www.paulkivel.com).

