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JC Mentor Program Final Reflection

In my life, I’ve been inclined to believe that the world sits on my shoulders, that I was meant to carry it along to a place beyond anyone’s imagination other than my own. It is the story I tell wherever I go and in whatever I do. When I began mentoring, I pictured myself a wise man sitting behind a set of still fairly youthful eyes carrying enlightened words to a child who had yet to see the error in his ways. I wanted to open eyes, shed light on the old way of thinking and seeing the world. I wanted to demonstrate a new perspective capable of creating a world of peace and happiness. I wanted to do this in a single semester.

The first time I met my mentee, he strode into the guidance office like he had been expecting me. I imagined this wasn't the first time; maybe he had done it at each sounding of the bell since the beginning of the week. He had such excitement, but I was focused on other things. I was Captain Michael Bush on a mission to change the life of this child, and I was still working out the stages, the plans of attack, the rendezvous points. We sat in the hallway and I guiltily confessed my feelings of anxiety and nervousness being my first time “mentoring.” Looking back, I wonder if he knew – I wonder as I sat there uncomfortably and his smile turned to a stare if he was thinking, “What sort of expectations, what sort of plans does this man have that he feels nervous meeting an eighth grader? Should I be nervous too?”

As it turned out, the eyes that were closed were my own. Even that first walk through the eighth grade hallway was like walking through a never before seen jungle, full of colorful creatures big and small. I had a lot to learn from day one – like French class, for one, is all about finishing the written exercises as fast as possible so you can make obscene gestures to the boys across the room, for all intents and purposes the only table at lunch is the one you sit at, recess is a place of ultimate freedom, and whatever anyone tells you, do the opposite unless they look like they are going to hurt you. There was a subtle sense of familiarity, like I had been there before, but there was no doubt about one thing – I was an outsider and if I was going to make it with my mentee’s tribe, I needed to learn to leave all expectation and judgments at the door and learn the language of the eighth grader all over again.

For weeks, I struggled. I wanted to help my mentee perform better in school, talk to girls, make friends, eat right, join clubs, read, write – essentially, take advantage of all the opportunities to sanctify his body and mind now. It felt so frustrating as I thought to myself “There’s so many ways to live that are just better! Why can’t he see this? Why not listen to someone who has experienced
different perspectives and understands?” I wanted to snap my fingers and save him all the trouble of growing up to see these things on his own.

It never worked though. I had to learn how to be a good teacher first. I needed to learn that no one responds when their way is questioned by someone else. I needed to learn the avenues of love and acceptance before I could embark on the journey of growth and integration. I spent many days just stepping around in his shoes, understanding what served him in life and what didn’t serve him.

In his short time, he had learned to move towards those older than him. This had been the second year in a row that he had requested a mentor. He also had a special relationship with the guidance counselor, and by the end of the semester, we would wave together whenever we saw her. Like any boy, he had a hard time acknowledging feelings and the humanity within everyone and was probably quick to judge himself and others. In the presence of counselors, I imagine he received a sense of love and acceptance so hard to experience around one’s peers. Furthermore, when it came to me, it was fun for him to have a constant playmate, someone he trusted.

He also had an artistic side. He loved manga – he would visit the library at recess on occasion just to sit down with a few. I was impressed to find that his love had also found a mode of expression in his uniquely drawn stick figure comics. While other teachers could only see his art through the lens of “academic distraction,” I immediately sought to encourage this apparent passion of his. Soon, he couldn’t wait to throw the newest “episode” of his series at me. They were called “The Adventures of D,” a story reminiscent of the old Dragonball Z comics I used to read. At first, I encouraged him to do more than just stick figures, but soon learned that the stick figures were only as important in so far as they told a story. Like me, he loved stories. Over time, instead of just reading them and offering a nod of appreciation, I began asking about certain scenes that I didn’t understand, helping him to hone his expression and give it greater clarity. There was a hope within me that instead of seeking other people’s approval as is so easy to do in an academic environment, he would forge his own path unmarred by the expectations of others.

He told me once when I asked what his deepest fear was, “To die alone.” I couldn’t tell if he was making fun of me at first, it was so dramatic. Later when I asked him again, he said, “I already told you!” “What? I must have forgotten,” I responded. “To die alone,” he said with a most sincere look. I was surprised by his honesty and his insight. In fact, when I thought about it, I realized I was afraid of that too. Maybe everyone has that fear.

When I watched him with his friends, it became clear how this fear manifested itself. He was nervous around others, even his close friends. When I suggested he talk to other people, especially
girls, he would pretend I didn’t say anything. It meant a lot to him to be with people. At the same time, I thought he might be sabotaging his efforts to be with people with thoughts like, “What if they don’t like what I say? What are they thinking about me right now? Am I going to die alone?” I imagine this because I have these thoughts – maybe not exactly, but close enough. He was ashamed that he didn’t have a girlfriend, ashamed of his own sabotage, and I learned later that he would spread rumors among his guy friends that certain girls liked him. Whether they were true or not didn’t matter – he felt the need to validate himself in the absence of any real action to be with someone. I wanted to help him so bad on this aspect, but any direct attempts to convince him didn’t work.

One day though, without even realizing it, I helped him. I sat down in French class and noticed there was a new girl in class. She looked nervous, afraid, and anxious, and I wanted to help her feel more comfortable. I started talking to her. She didn’t say much, kept her arms folded, but when I made fun of my mentee, she laughed. I kept it up the next day and before I knew it, the two of them had a little game of flirting going on. On another occasion, I was feeling especially friendly and started talking to all the girls in Devon’s social studies class. He was embarrassed, told me that all the girls thought I was weird, but I shrugged it off, hoping he’d learn to do the same.

In all this journeying, I was no longer a foreigner in foreign lands. As I entered the school, I was surprised to notice myself looking at all the “adults” with a little bit of fear and suspicion, as if they existed to prevent me from connecting and having fun with my new friends. I began to enter class with a sense of excitement, curious about what I would learn. In class, I would try to pay attention, a little annoyed with all the distractions at times and then other times being at the center of them. At recess, my friends would try to sneak up behind me and wrestle me to the ground. I was an eighth grader.

I’m not sure what the future holds. I have committed to see my mentor next semester – how I will spend that time is a mystery to me. Is it time to start integrating the experience of being an eighth grader with the wisdom I have as a college student? Or am I already doing that? Regardless of what plan I have, there is a greater plan behind this program - one that many of us can’t even really describe or understand. Where it leads me, I don’t know, but I trust it is a good direction.

These children – they are mirrors and we are mirrors to them. There is nothing I can teach them that they can’t learn for themselves. There is nothing about them that we don’t own ourselves. Just by being with them, they grow. Just by being with them, we grow. May this tradition of opening, broadening, and seeing continue for others like me.