



Mission Possible: Thoughts on Mentorship

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BLESSED is the first word that comes to mind when I look at my own history of artistic development. Since the early 90s, I have been surrounded by brilliant and generous souls without whose guidance I would not have become a professional storyteller. I even joke sometimes that my 'special talent' lies not in storytelling per se, but in choosing the right teachers for myself. My mentors include Elisabeth Ellis, late master mime Tony Montanaro, theater artist Leland Faulkner, Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo and Nancy Wang of EthNohTec, CT Storytelling Festival Director Peg O'Sullivan, and my foremost ally and partner, Eshu Bumpus.

I have known and worked with these masters for 11 years at least, with some for more than 20. They have helped me clarify my vision and articulate my thoughts. They have taught me to strengthen my skills and to connect with my audience. Most importantly, they have constantly encouraged me to be creative and let me know that American storytelling has a place for me, an immigrant from Japan.

Rich, meaningful mentorship is a staple for an artist. What do my mentors, and other great teachers of the art, have in common? What constitutes a meaningful mentorship in storytelling? Three factors come to mind.

First, all my mentors keep creating and growing as artists and teachers. They never seem to stop and settle. Tony continued to perform and teach right up to his passing in 2002. Elizabeth premiered a new show last year at age 70 at the National Storytelling Festival. Leland is polishing his newly acquired magic trick that involves 'beheading' an audience member. Nancy's stories about her mother, and her ancestors' passage to America are coming into fruition. Under Peg's leadership the CT Festival continues to evolve. Eshu is working on a collaboration project with a school in Senegal.

As their mentee, I am fortunate to learn firsthand not just from their past accomplishments but also from their current efforts and struggles. I love their



work, but our relationships are based on more than just my admiration for their products. It is their creative process—conceiving, crafting, and sharing of new material—that inspires me and prompts me to face my own tasks. They do not need to tell me to get to work. Great mentors teach by example.

This leads to my second point. My mentors are all incredibly patient and generous. They have made a long-term commitment to teaching their art forms, knowing they probably will not get rich by doing so. Tony had his own school in Maine, where his students could come to stay and learn for months at a time. Some, like Elizabeth and Leland, have taken their students in to live with them as interns, an arrangement reminiscent of a traditional apprenticeship. Mentees in these situations ‘drink’ in the mentor’s life. The ways a mentor solves problems, treats others, and enjoys herself teach as much as her words.

A student may initially go to a teacher looking for a specific skill or knowledge, such as mime or voice training. If they are willing to spend a significant amount of ‘quality time’ together, the relationship will quickly develop into something more holistic. This may also bring up the issue of money. Each pair must find a balance between what is affordable and what is respectful.

The third factor is kind and honest communication, unencumbered by ego or ulterior motives. Mentorship is essentially and deeply personal, and therefore carries its potential pitfalls. A mentor’s ego may make him lose sight of his love for the art and render him controlling. A mentee’s own insecurity may interfere, and turn the relationship unproductive.

I once took a summer intensive with a theater professor that left a bitter aftertaste. Although he gave the class interesting exercises and made insightful comments, it ultimately became very clear that he did not have a shred of interest in who we were, what our goals and aspirations might have been. He wanted us to be nameless bodies to fit into his scheme on stage and act exactly as he wanted. A power trip should not be mistaken for guidance.

Fortunately for me, my mentors all have shown me by example how they set their egos aside and focus on their students’ various needs. They see what is good in



my work even before I see it myself. That does not mean they only give me praise and chocolate. They share their ideas and opinions with searing honesty, and urge me to grow without compromising my own vision of who I want to be.

Mentorship is essential for survival of storytelling as an art form. We must 'pay forward' to pay back. My first foray into being a mentor began with Arizona storyteller Dustin Loehr, when the NSN awarded us the 2009 JJ Reneaux Mentorship Grant. I am seeking more teaching opportunities this year, starting with a 4-hour pre-conference intensive at Sharing the Fire. I cannot guarantee I will be as good as any of my mentors, but I am delighted and honored to try my darned best!