

# Letters to a Young Catholic: How to be mentored

Dear Friend,

It is all too easy to find someone who will tell you what you want to hear. It is much harder to find someone who, when necessary and out of concern for you, will tell you what you do not want to hear. We might think of ourselves as being mentored in either case, but seeking permission for what you already wanted is self-direction hiding under the cover of what looks like humility and obedience. Being truly mentored requires a willingness to wrestle with more, less and other than what you would otherwise determine for yourself.

## The good model

During the time in my life where I needed to learn how to receive mentoring, I encountered a powerful model of such a relationship in a great work of literature I was reading for a college course. In “The Brothers Karamazov,” Alyosha seeks out direction from an elderly monk named Zosima. With his home life complicated and often clouded by suffering and sadness, Alyosha found light, wisdom and peace in Zosima. Alyosha went to Zosima regularly, to learn from him and be formed by him. In fact, Alyosha wanted to be a monk himself because, from his time with Zosima, he thought becoming a monk would be “an ideal way out for his soul struggling from the darkness of worldly wickedness toward the light of love.” But in his final conversation with Zosima before his death, Alyosha does not hear what he wants to hear. Instead, the elder monk offers his mentee what he came to see as the young man’s true path and calling: “You will go forth from these walls to sojourn in the world like a monk.”

[Read more from our Letters to a Young Catholic series here.](#)

Alyosha wanted permission to leave his family's strife behind and enter the monastery. Zosima told Alyosha that his mission was to return to his family and serve them amid the complications and sufferings, and to do so with the freedom of one who has been formed in the monastic disciplines of obedience, fasting and prayer. It would have been very easy at this point for Alyosha to simply find someone who would tell him what he wanted to hear. But Alyosha did not take the easy path; instead, he wrestled with Zosima's direction. Zosima had earned Alyosha's trust, and Alyosha honored that trust by taking Zosima's counsel seriously.

## **The bad model**

Just about the same time I was reading "The Brothers Karamazov," I also saw (and then read) "A Man for All Seasons," which is about St. Thomas More. Early on in that film (and play), the young Richard Rich comes to Thomas looking for direction in life. Richard wants to be an important man with a high and impressive office. Thomas, who knows Richard quite well, shows the young man that such an office would not be good for him. Instead, Thomas tells him, Richard would do well to become a teacher. Richard does not want to be a teacher, because he will not have a high status. This is precisely Thomas's point: Richard is lusting after status, not virtue and service.

It is hard for Richard to hear what Thomas has to tell him. Richard really wants Thomas to mentor him, but he wants to get his own way even more. So Richard aligns himself with another would-be mentor, who gives Richard what he wants, but neither knows nor cares for the young man himself. This leads to Richard's ruin – not in terms of his career, but in terms of his character. Richard becomes a man who will do anything for what he wants.

Alyosha Karamazov and Richard Rich began in similar situations but ended up very differently. Alyosha was willing to wrestle

with his mentor's direction even to the point of adapting his own life plans. Richard, however, was so committed to the way he wanted to see things turn out for himself that he became impervious to the wise counsel of the mentor who tried to care for him. Alyosha became a man capable of sacrifice, while Richard became a man consumed by self-interest. Alyosha was willing to be mentored; Richard was not.

## **Pushing back**

We are surrounded by "influencers." That is not a role that was suddenly invented on social media; there have always been influencers. What is different in our day is that the number of influencers or potential influencers who surround us has grown exponentially. Alyosha and Richard were, for the most part, limited in their influences – only the people around them could influence them. Because of our digital environments, the number of people who surround us is virtually infinite. We are bobbing along in an endless sea of influences.

The rise of the religious influencers is really no different than that of other media influencers. There are priests you've never met in person who offer guidance as if they were your pastor or spiritual director. There are alluring religious personalities who, with some media savvy, dispense popular wisdom and tutor large followings in spiritual and cultural matters. If we don't like what we hear from the pastor or teacher or guide who is proximate to us, then we can very easily find someone else who will delight and please us online. It is far from the case that every in-person influence is good and every online influence is bad. The point here is about the ease with which we can find other voices whenever we want: it is easier today than ever before.

## Three practices

This brings me to the first necessary practice in how to be mentored: Limit and guard your influences. Some of us like the feeling of being mentored more than actually being mentored. What I mean is that it is, at times, enjoyable to have someone else take interest in our well-being and offer us direction. It is so enjoyable that, for example, I have seen quite a few college students collect “mentors” like patches for a letterman jacket. But what this really does is drown out the voices of those who are actually in the position to offer the most honest, knowledgeable and considerate counsel. Alyosha spent time with Zosima, and Zosima came to know Alyosha quite well. If Alyosha had five more mentors whom he counted as equal to Zosima, then Zosima’s counsel would have been relativized. We can attach ourselves to these “would-be mentors” in person and online, allowing more and more voices to swirl around our heads. That is a recipe for both confusion and, more likely, self-direction: opting for the voice who tells you what you like best. The key is intentionally limiting your primary mentors. Invest in those few relationships so that those people can invest in you.

The second necessary practice is twofold: consistency and honesty. To allow someone to be a mentor to you, you must communicate with them regularly. It is easier to go to mentors only when you need something, but that diminishes how well the mentor can mentor you. Staying in consistent contact with a mentor – even to the point of scheduling out in advance regular meeting times – adds stability and familiarity to the relationship. This obviously requires that the communication be as honest as possible. A mentoring relationship is not a relationship among equals – as mentee, the focus is on you. A good mentor (and my next letter is on how to be a mentor) places his or her primary attention on the other person, listening closely and acting deliberately. Sometimes it is really hard to be honest with a mentor because you want to

keep up appearances, or you don't want to disappoint, or you want to pick and choose what to share. The more honest you are with your mentor, the more the focus can be on who you really are instead of who you appear to be.

The third and final practice I share is threefold: Choose intentionally, reflect deeply, follow up thoughtfully. Very rarely are we assigned mentors in life; instead, we typically have to seek out our mentors. We should, therefore, choose our mentors intentionally. Whom can I trust? Who is capable of guiding me? Whose virtues and character are worthy of imitation? It is even OK to "interview" mentors, to see if they would be willing to mentor you, if they can commit to sharing time and wisdom with you, and how they would do so.

Following from that initial intentionality, the next form of intentionality is found in reflecting deeply on what you share with a mentor and what they offer back to you. I recommend keeping a journal where you can prepare for conversations with a mentor and reflect on your mentoring discussions afterward. This is the kind of work that allows you to make the best use of – and take as seriously as possible – the mentoring relationship.

Reflecting on your conversations prepares you to fulfill the third form of intentionality, which is following up thoughtfully. Let's consider, for example, if after Alyosha received Zosima's instruction and seriously grappled with it, Alyosha discerned, to the best of his ability, to pursue a different path from the one Zosima advised. The thoughtful follow up for Alyosha would, in that case, entail coming back to Zosima to talk with him about why he is choosing a different path (or, in this case, since Zosima was dying, to talk with someone else about this). The mentor may, of course, respond and even disagree, but any mentor worth his weight in salt will appreciate, admire and respect the free decision of his mentee when the mentee "shows his work," so to speak, or shares the reasons for his decision.

We are not meant to find our paths alone. You and I both need mentors to help us along the way. A biblical proverb reads: "He who walks with wise men becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm" (Prov. 13:20). Fools tell us what we want to hear, while those who are wise tell us what we need to hear. If we follow only what we want, we become like the fools. If we are willing to accept what we need, we are wise and become wiser.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lenny".

*Leonard J. DeLorenzo, Ph.D., works in the McGrath Institute for Church Life and teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame. Subscribe to his weekly newsletter, "Life, Sweetness, Hope," at [bit.ly/lifesweetnesshope](http://bit.ly/lifesweetnesshope).*