

The Naked Eye

The Mentor Trap

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*What happens when we
outgrow our Pygmalion?*

When I was 17, and out of jail for the third time that year, I met the man who saved my life.

We were in the desert, at a bar. I was drunk as usual, and looking for a party to last me the rest of the weekend. He was sober as always, and looking for someone to save. We walked under the stars for hours exchanging intimate information, watching tumbleweeds blow across moon-bleached sand. By the end of the weekend, I'd moved my stuff into his house.

At first this home-leaving seemed like a lark, a quick way to escape my mother and make a vertical lifestyle shift. But the truth was more complex than that. Having grown up without a father, I was desperate for an authority figure, an adult male to help me out of my chronic confusion and keep me from landing in Alcatraz. No one before Bob had come close. He was the first man I'd ever met who seemed truly happy, whose life and character impressed me enough to inspire emulation. Here was someone who knew who he was, knew what he wanted, and knew, most important of all, how to get it. Bob ran his personal and professional lives with an iron hand, armed with checklists, schedules, and unbreakable routines designed for success. *Use what you've got to get what you want*—that was Bob's motto, and though this opportunism seemed questionable, I was too young to pinpoint why. When I smelled the leather of his Mercedes, or helped one of his clients dodge a paparazzo, or saw the satisfied look on Bob's face as he closed a lucrative deal, I convinced myself that my newfound idol was deeply in touch with the secret of life.

I hitched my wagon to his star, obeyed him like one of his lackeys, remade myself to his specifications. Bob told me how to dress, how to think, how to comb my hair. He showed me why Elgar was greater than Purcell, how to flatter salesmen on Rodeo Drive, how to say "par-



don" instead of "huh," how not to slurp my linguine at the Fenice Hotel in Venice. When I graduated with honors from college (he'd sent me to Berkeley himself, telling me that I was a writer), Bob bragged like a father, taking his share of the credit for my newfound respectability. "I knew there was a good kid in there somewhere," he joked at my 21st birthday party, and hearing those words of approval seemed to confirm my existence. Proving Bob right, not disappointing him, was my primary goal. If Bob believed I was okay, then life itself was on my side.

I'm not sure when this faith started to crumble. But slowly, as I matured, the guidance I'd craved

from Bob began to feel like a nuisance. The more I learned about myself, the more suffocating his shadow became. His faults glared out at me and I was unforgiving as only a child (or would-be child) can be of his parent's human weaknesses. As my hero worship faded, I realized that not only was Bob human, but also he could be a real jerk. When I opposed his ideas and values, instead of respecting my point of view, he slapped me down with surprising fury. This competition between us mounted and soon we were battling violently, horns locked, neither of us willing to back down. The more stubbornly I held my ground, daring to offer Bob *my* advice, to speak to him as a peer—the more he raged. Much as I didn't want to admit it, Eliza Doolittle had been right: There was a definite downside to having a Pygmalion (or, I think, any mentor) especially when you give them too much control. A latent megalomania often lurks behind the desire to help. Knowing that life with Bob was a dead-end street, there was nothing for me to do but leave him, or stay in a subservient role for the rest of my life.

We pretended to remain friends, but this was a ruse; I was never a friend to Bob, I was a mentee, not his equal. Though Bob tried being happy for my successes, his kudos were mixed with ambivalence, the unspoken hint that my way was never quite what he would have chosen. As the years went by, I watched Bob repeat his mentoring pattern with young people who blossomed, warred, and deserted in their turn, and I wondered about this predictable pattern. Why was
(Continued on page 47)

Illustration by Timothy Cook

The Naked Eye

(Continued from page 48)

mentoring such a tricky proposition? Was Bob merely overcontrolling, and those of us who came under his spell, needy beyond the pale? Or was the setup itself suspicious? In the *Odyssey*, Mentor is the character whom Odysseus leaves in charge of his house when he sets sail in search of his real father. Without knowing it, I'd done something similar with Bob, trusting him with the care of my soul, then leaving him to find out who I was on my own. This pattern, I came to realize, is endemic to mentoring itself. If the mentee learns his lessons well, he must move on, fighting to wrest back control of his life.

And while these affairs—since that's what they are, intimate meetings of mind and soul—can be rewarding for both parties, they're fraught with dangers as well. When a woman I know told her beloved mentor—the man who'd plucked her from the typing pool and taught her everything he knew for eight years as his assistant—that she'd been offered a job equivalent to his, he yelled at her in front of the staff, threatened her with a lawsuit, and hasn't spoken to her since.

You might say that mentees have it coming. They suck the tit and walk away, just like kids, but without the blood tie. Why wouldn't mentors feel ripped off since the reward for their efforts is vicarious by definition. Ideally it's the mentee's job to honor and be grateful—and everyone who plays this role is expected to do so with particular grace—but this doesn't always happen. A fellow I used to know was outraged by a kid who did him wrong this way. My acquaintance was someone who lived to help others—charity was his greatest joy—but when his protégé became an overnight success in the same field, the shadow side of the mentor's role came into full view. He felt that his soul had been stolen and accused the upstart of the worst betrayal. Objectively, it was obvious that it had been a two-way street. The mentee's motives

were self-serving but so were the mentor's. Finding someone to worship you is no small feat; spoon-feeding life to a willing mentee is a high that the ego can hardly resist. While my friend had indeed been fleeced, no one had put a gun to his head to be so generous. Nor had his mentee signed up as a *career* sycophant. When the time came for the mentee to use what he'd learned, he did so without apology, and while the fallout was ugly, there were no victims. After a good deal of grieving, my friend admitted as much and vowed never to mentor again. "The next time I start to help someone, lock me in the trunk of your car," he said afterward.

I wouldn't even try. This guy is a lifer, just like Bob, born to pull people up by their bootstraps and push them toward their dreams. Mentoring's a fetish for them, partly noble, partly erotic, and when they're not busy calling the shots, they feel something missing from their lives. As a breed, the mentors I've known are people who hate to need, don't ask for help, and dislike not knowing. They love to be envied, crave being helpful, and need to be in control. In other words, I came to realize, they weren't very different from me.

When it came my turn to be used, I saw this with exasperating clarity; the coin flipped (I was heads) and I found myself pulled into this game. My mentee reminded me of my jailbait self, a smartass piece of work thoroughly lost but also sincere. He didn't merely look up to me, he wanted to be me, imagining I was the voice of wisdom that would lead him out of the wilderness. I jumped on the chance, gave him books, took him to gurus, drove him out West to college. I'd expected to be treated like a patriarch, to take pride in the youthful achievements I had helped spawn. Rather than thanking me, of course, he grew to despise me for my efforts. The more I tried to maintain our bond, the more he accused me of interfering, "erasing" him with my presence, using him to bolster my ego. The more I tried to set him straight, the farther he fled from where I was,

finally disappearing from sight with no forwarding address.

I was hurt and angry and played the tragic hero for as long as I could. But when I began to reflect on my role as mentor, I realized that my young friend was right. I *had* secretly used him, the way parents sometimes use their children for self-aggrandizement. My good intentions were dangerous; more dangerous, from a certain perspective, than open competition might be since it masqueraded as pure kindness. With the tables turned, I felt firsthand what Bob must have felt with me, and seeing his side of the story, I finally began to forgive him.

When Bob was dying, I had the chance to tell him these things and to thank him, without reservation, for saving my life. He told me that he'd done it out of love, and because he thought that I was worth it. We were in a restaurant on Fifth Avenue, eating lunch. Bob was mellowed and frail. The atmosphere between us had finally grown peaceful; the struggle was done, I thought, we were finally allies. Then something snapped between us—some trivial remark sparked a conflict. Bob insisted on being right, I held my ground, and before we knew it we were shouting at each at the top of our lungs, banging our forks like samurai. When we'd finally worn each other out and Bob had lost his appetite, he asked me to finish his steak. I refused out of spite.

At the hotel door, I hugged him for the last time and waved goodbye. Afterwards, walking home feeling like an immature wretch, I understood that this conflict would never subside. Bob and I would always remain adversaries as well as friends. He was my mentor after all, and that's what a mentor does: irritate you to make you grow. Like an ornery coach you can never quite please, a mentor sets the bar higher and higher. That's his job and it makes you hate him. It also makes you a better player.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek has completed a sequel to his book *Sex Death Enlightenment*, which Riverhead Books will publish this year. He welcomes responses at MMatousek@aol.com