

SOMETIMES, OLDER FOLKS NEED MENTORS, TOO

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



Mention “mentor,” and many people will think of a village elder, perhaps with hair silvered by age, who dispenses wisdom

gleaned from years of experience.

But sometimes, when they’re not mentoring others, older folks can need their *own* mentors, as I was reminded when I switched careers a few years ago.

In 2020, after 33 happy years at a daily newspaper, I took my first job editing a magazine. It was an important transition for me, but an even bigger change involved the broader office culture. At 55, for the first time in my life, I’d be working for a nonprofit – and a national one at that. That professional shift meant I’d have to learn different institutional priorities, and the new rhythms of my office life would require some adjustments, too.

What I needed to learn the ropes – and what I soon happily found – were mentors. All of them were younger than I was, some radically so, but it

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didn’t seem to matter. I was willing to learn, and they were willing to share their insights.

Although technically defined in some circles as a senior citizen, I was now the junior partner in these mentoring relationships, what’s often called a “mentee.” I wish we had a better name for those who learn from mentors. “Mentee” sounds a bit too awkwardly like “minty,” and there’s also a diminutive ring to “mentee” that can seem diminishing.

Perhaps “apprentice” would be better, though that word describes the acquisition of a narrow set of skills. Mentorship tends to be more expansive in what it reveals. The best mentors share more than the secret to accomplishing a certain task. Good mentors also help us to know and inhabit a particular way of life.

I think age and experience made me a better mentee in my 50s than I’d been as a young man. When I entered journalism at 23, I was a bit too headstrong to fully grasp what my mentors were trying to impart. In one’s 20s, there’s often a strong impulse to break with past generations, to embrace novelty over precedent. I wasn’t too keen on learning the old ways. I wanted to make new ways for myself.

Over time, though, I came to understand that all serious innovation builds on what came before it. To be the best version of my professional self, I’d benefit from connecting with office veterans.

Humility is a great asset for any learner, and I had a much sharper sense of my own limitations when I changed jobs four years ago. I’m still learning, perhaps destined to be a mentee of some sort the rest of my life.

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