

**Creativity in Mentoring**

**Background Reading**

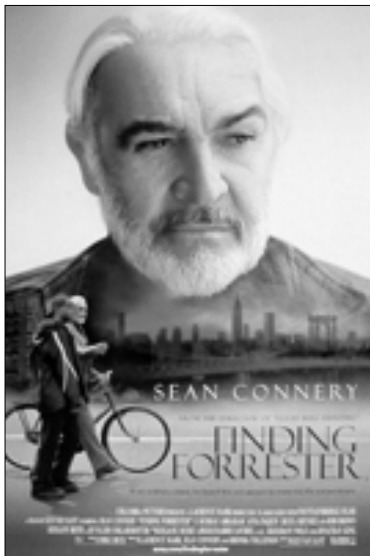
**Elders as Mentors**

*No thinking - that comes later. You must write your first draft with your heart. You rewrite with your head. The first key to writing is... to write, not to think!*

- Forrester to Jamal  
in *Finding Forrester*

*International films portray older adults who have functioned as mentors, aged in place, drawn people to them, and fought to maintain the values of their community. They have lived within the context of old traditions and unchanging ways. The old have been tested by experience; they are survivors, negotiators, and realists. The old have reached an understanding that the individual is nothing unless he or she is part of the community.*

- Robert Yahnke  
*Heroes of Their Own Stories*



**What messages about mentoring does this DVD cover communicate?**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "The greatest gift is a portion of thyself." A century later this practice of intergenerational giving was labeled "generativity." Psychologist Erik Erikson used the term to refer to an older person's need to contribute to the next generation by the act of mentoring or nurturing and guiding younger people. In his book *Vital Involvement in Old Age* Erikson suggested that elders may experience a child's creative accomplishments as the vicarious reward for their own mentoring of that child (Erikson et al., 1986, p. 82).

Dr. Gene Cohen described the impact of mentoring on older people in a way that stretches beyond family and vicarious experience. In *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain* he wrote that intergenerational contact provides stimulation and rewards for strangers as well as family. He suggested that relationships such as mentoring help to support elders' capacity to enhance existing relationships and to build new ones. He referred to this capacity as "social intelligence" and suggested that it is one form of intelligence that usually improves with age (Cohen, 2005, p. 116).

Author Mark Gerzon examined the symbolic importance of intergenerational mentoring in his book, *Coming Into Our Own: Understanding the Adult Metamorphosis*:

Elders know something that those of us in other stages of the life cycle need to understand; they possess something that the generations following them need. Within their bodies and minds, at the core of their very beings, true elders embody the gift of life. Just as newborns archetypally symbolize hope and new beginnings, those who are closest to the end of the life cycle symbolize wisdom and wholeness (Gerzon, 1992, p. 194).

### Affirming our Need to Protect Elders

In 2002 the United Nations World Assemblies on Aging heard testimony from gerontologist Robert N. Butler who presented a Declaration of Rights of Older Persons that was jointly drafted by his Intergenerational Longevity Center and the Yale Law School Clinic. The Declaration began with a clear statement of elders' role as mentors to the young:

In spite of the fact that our elders have historically served as guides and mentors of the generations to follow, they are seldom provided the same rich opportunities for social, cultural and productive roles as other groups, and are instead frequently subjected to discrimination, as well as physical, sexual, emotional, and financial exploitation, both in society, as well as their own home. (International Longevity Center, 2008)

Dr. Butler's understanding of the connections between intergenerational relationships and social justice is reflected at the university level in course offerings such as *Multigenerational Relations* and *Social Justice* at the University of Washington School of Social Work and the Community Justice Project and Elder Law Practice group at the University of St. Thomas Law School.



**What techniques did the artist use to communicate the meaning of mentoring?**

Alongside the efforts of these community and academic institutions, the medium of film provides an avenue to affirm elders as mentors. In 2005 Robert E. Yahnke, Professor of Film & the Arts at the University of Minnesota, published the results of his study of elder mentors in film in an essay entitled "Heroes of Their Own Stories: Expressions of Aging in International Cinema," which was published in the journal *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*. The study included 14 feature length films from around the world with the aim of "providing gerontologists with models of successful aging that portray elders as being valued within the context of community" (Yahnke, 2005, p. 57). One of the films in the study, *Tea With Mussolini*, is included in this curriculum.

Dr. Yahnke concluded that films like these provide an opportunity to illustrate the essential role that elders play as role models and as catalysts initiating life change for young people, middle-aged adults and for their communities. He argued that as elders "age in place" or grow older within particular communities, they provide a bridge to the younger generations. This mentor's bridge can lead to an affirmation of the values that maintain unity within community. He concluded:

In each of these examples, elders play significant roles in helping the young make the transition from either childhood to adolescence or from adolescence to adulthood. The old listen, inspire, teach, affirm, accept, sacrifice, and challenge the young to let go of the past, resolve old hurts, form new and diverse family bonds, accept their own shortcomings, and embrace new and unsettling ways to view the world. (Yahnke, 2005, p. 65)



