



On Becoming a Role Model

What if there were no role models? What if you looked around and saw no one who had the legitimacy, the moral authority, the authenticity that earned your trust, confidence, and respect?

What if you looked around and didn't see anyone you wanted to be? Where would you look for guidance, direction, coaching? Given today's crisis in leadership, that isn't such a far-off concept. So where would you look?

Let's start with a metaphorical mirror. Let's pretend, for a moment, that role modelling is first a function of looking at ourselves, looking inward to determine who we are. This isn't a new idea—Socrates, Confucius, Elders, and others have long advised young people to “know yourself.”

So how do you know yourself and to your own self be true?

Life's a Stage

A clue might be in the fact that when we are asked to name the people we most admire, many individuals often answer “actors” by name, not politicians, although a rare Nelson Mandela sneaks in. Not sports figures, not professionals, nor civil servants, or teachers, but actors.

Mel Gibson, Jody Foster, Bob DeNiro, Robin Williams, Meryl Streep, Tom Hanks come to mind. This is because of the many roles they have played, so many aspects of individuals they have touched—the healers, teachers, warriors, visionaries, and yes, the

politicians, doctors, lawyers, priests, police, gangsters, parents, and so many other roles with which we identify.

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Through the roles they have played, the actors get to know themselves better; and vicariously, we, in turn, know ourselves better. That's why we revere and respect actors most. In the totality of their performances, they seem more complete as individuals, more worthy of our respect. As actors, these role models also empower us to explore whatever has heart and meaning for us. The movies in which they star are information-age novels—brief, visual, and impactful.

In talking to a friend about this subject, she said that in ancient times, actors were considered sacred because they lived their lives most fully by exploring and portraying the diverse aspects of themselves, of humanity—from loving parents, to healers, comedians, and killers.

Through the actors, she said, individual and collective human nature was experienced in a safe environment. Events and ancient stories could be retold

safely, with positive role modelling and the goodness of mankind being the lesson.

Can we all be actors? If life's a stage, perhaps we all are.

As actors we are asked to play the many different roles of mom or dad, coach, teacher, writer, Notary, soldier, servant, doctor, lawyer, chief, politician, and infinite others. How many roles, in how many plays, must we perfect in a lifetime?

And then you Teach

Another clue in this pursuit comes from a conversation I had with a Shaman a few years ago. Briefly, we were talking about a cold wind coming off the ocean; he noted how important it was to “Experience everything.”

Experiencing everything is quite an assignment, I thought, but how else can you know yourself fully? How else can you know what you are good at, what you like, dislike, or even who you are? I recalled from earlier church teachings “Everything in moderation. And, everything is good.”

The Shaman's next advice was to “Report back,” meaning that in everything we do, we are always reporting back: to ourselves, to our creator, and perhaps more obviously to our family, colleagues, and community.

“And then you teach” was his final point. Through our experiences and by reporting back, we become teachers, or in this case, true role models.

We become role models by living “who” we are in authenticity because we know through our experience “why” we are. As we are recognized in that authenticity, we become legitimate in our own eyes, in our chosen fields, and gain public trust, confidence, and respect.

In our lives, by setting a consistent example of principled actions, we develop leadership. From that leadership, others can choose to emulate aspects of our lives, to use us as role models, if they choose, if what we do and who we are resonates with their pursuit of who they really are.

To a role model, one who is widely experienced, and who is now a teacher, comes the greatest responsibility—that of allowing others to “know themselves”—to create opportunities and environments where people can explore themselves in the widest diversity available to them.

Courage

Sometimes creating environments free from media input and other stimuli is the greatest gift to individuals—time to think,

to process information, to contemplate themselves. Time in nature also heals.

And yes, sometimes this is not without risk, not without danger, as every parent knows, and the daily news reports. Sometimes there are casualties. Dying while doing something one loves, something one needs to experience, is always tragic. But not to risk “knowing” might be more tragic in the long run. The base of the word courage is *cuer*, an old French word meaning heart.

Following one’s heart is always true courage, not just in the mountains, nor in space, nor in times of war. There is also courage in seeking peace, in the quiet endeavours in homes and offices, gardens and nurseries, in art and healing.

In the pursuit of knowledge about oneself, our god-given nature drives us forward on this, the most ethical journey of all. In this pursuit, we must keep in mind, there is always more beauty than tragedy, and sometimes it is the tragedy that focuses us on how beautiful our lives are.

Role models—be they parents or professionals—know there is risk in personal growth. Personal success rarely, if ever, comes easy.

There is a never-ending circle of role models, starting in the mirror we see of ourselves. It circles back in the reflection of those who lead us today, back into history and mythology, in the literature and traditional stories of old. The circle also moves forward in the experiences of those who will follow us.

Being free to explore ourselves fully, to know who we truly are, by being the best we can be in our chosen purpose, and by allowing others to do the same in their lives, is to become the greatest role model. ▲

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