Mentoring as the "Giving and Receiving of Wisdom": Breaking the Chains of Colonialism on Our Hearts, Minds, and Souls

By Glenn Omatsu

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When we hear the word mentoring, a powerful image forms in our minds: that of an old sage (almost always male with long hair and often a flowing beard) sitting for hours in a secluded space and providing wisdom to a young person. This dominant image shapes our core beliefs about mentoring. We usually define mentoring as consisting of long-term relationships, as involving the transmission of wisdom from the old to the young, and as occurring in magical "big moments" between two people. However, there is a basic problem with this definition. It is wrong, and it is largely shaped by western colonialism.

In reality, mentors in our communities are both young and old, can be female as well as male, and can have short hair or no hair. The mentors in our lives can be sages, but they are more likely "ordinary" people all around us. In the real world, mentoring means more than an isolated, long-term relationship involving two individuals; most mentoring occurs in a web of

relationships with others (i.e., within a community). In our communities, mentoring is reciprocal and not one-way — i.e., mentoring involves an interactive process in which both the mentor and mentee benefit. And, perhaps most important, mentoring in the real world occurs not only in "big moments" but mainly in "little moments" — i.e., as part of our daily interactions with others.

In their small book, *Mentoring: The Tao of Giving and Receiving Wisdom*, Chungliang Al Huang and Jerry Lynch remind us about the mentoring opportunities that are always all around us. They define mentoring as "the giving and receiving of wisdom" within a web of relationships. Through the interactions that mentors have with others, they share the "gift of wisdom and [have] it graciously appreciated and received by others who then carry the gift to all those within their sphere of influence."[1] Mentoring, Huang and Lynch further emphasize, occurs within a community, and mentoring activities help to promote a culture of wisdom throughout this community.

According to Huang and Lynch's expanded understanding of mentoring, each of us daily has many opportunities to serve as both a mentor and mentee with those around us. Yes, mentoring does occur in special "big moments" — those built up through relationships with a few individuals that we have worked with intensely for years — but we need to more fully recognize that the most powerful acts of mentoring happen during "little moments." The "little moments" occur in our day-to-day interactions with others all around us. For teachers, these "little moments" of mentoring are infused into our teaching in the classroom and our daily interactions

with our students. For community activists, these "little moments" occur in our patient and day-to-day activities educating and organizing with others. However, if we are to truly capture the potential contained in these "little moments," we need to expand our consciousness and overcome the continuing ideological impact of western colonialism and its narrow definition of mentoring.

The colonial definition of mentoring limits our thinking and the scope of our activities. It restricts the "who, what, when, where, why, and how" of mentoring. It promotes a narrow belief that we can only mentor a select and special few, that we can only mentor during specific times in a day, and that we can only mentor in particular locations. Of course, for political activists, the colonial definition of mentoring clashes with our everyday experiences. Yet, if the colonial definition of mentoring clashes with everyday practices, why does it continue to dominate our consciousness? I believe the answer lies in the largely unrecognized legacy of colonialism in our hearts, minds, and souls.

Political activists have created an impressive body of work critiquing the political and economic legacy of colonialism on the lives of all people today. Nevertheless, much more work needs to be done to analyze and root out the legacy of colonialism from our consciousness, especially as it manifests in our day-to-day practices and thinking. In the world today, all people — including political activists — have unconsciously assimilated a colonizer's view of society. This perspective, for example, influences the ways we conceptualize organizing to change society. According to the colonial perspective, social change comes from the initiative of an individual

person who uses the power of reason to build awareness in others as a precondition for collective action. Political change occurs through "big moments," which are prepared by numerous small steps. The small steps are defined as simply incremental in the arduous task of changing society and have no value in and of themselves. In short, the colonizer's perspective focuses on the individual person as the basic unit in society (as opposed to seeing the individual within a community), the overarching power of reason (as opposed to understanding the relationship of reason with emotions, values, and other human qualities), the separation of thinking from acting (as opposed to focusing on the interaction between knowing and doing), the emphasis on distinct stages for creating change (as opposed to appreciating process), and the conviction that change consists of "big moments" prepared by small steps (as opposed to recognizing that small steps shape the bigger outcomes and are really the most important part of social change).[2]

Understanding the colonizer's perspective of society is important because it shapes how we see mentoring. It also points to the necessity to create an expanded vision of mentoring, one that is unfettered by colonialism. Significantly, this broader, alternative vision does not have to be invented because it already exists. It exists in our work as community activists, in the traditions of indigenous peoples, and in the worldwide struggles of grassroots movements today. However, due to the dominant impact of colonialism on our consciousness, we need to develop a strategy to foreground the alternative vision of mentoring. In my own work as a teacher and activist, I have found it helpful to focus on four organizing principles that can help us foreground this alternative vision. First, to appreciate the little moments of mentoring in our daily lives, I emphasize the power of "mentoring on the run." Second, to overcome the misconception that mentoring involves two isolated individuals, I emphasize the concept of a "community of

mentors" acting within a web of relationships. Third, to envision mentoring as a positive force for social change, I emphasize the promotion of a "culture of mentoring" in the communities where we live and work. Fourth, to understand the transformative aspects of mentoring for each person's life, I emphasize the insight of Huang and Lynch that mentoring always involves "the giving and receiving of wisdom." Of course, these four organizing principles are not original ideas, and many will recognize the imprint of activist-thinkers such as Paulo Freire, Lev Vygotsky, Margaret Wheatley, Subcommandante Marcos, Grace Lee Boggs, Philip Vera Cruz, Thich Nhat Hanh, Dekanawidah, and others.[3] In addition, my understanding of these organizing principles has been shaped by the many mentors in my life, such as immigrant workers.[4] How, then, can each of these organizing principles enable us to foreground an alternative vision of mentoring?

Learning How to "Mentor on the Run":

Appreciating the Power of "Little Moments" of Mentoring

I work at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), a large, commuter campus north of Los Angeles. I am responsible for mentoring hundreds of students each year through the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). They are low-income students and the first in their families to attend college. According to educational research, these students are the most "at-risk" population of failing and dropping out of college during their first year. At the same time, researchers have also identified the key role that mentors can play in helping these students succeed during their critical first year in college. [5] Yet, how is it possible for one person to

mentor hundreds of new students each year? At the most, it may be possible to establish strong relationships with thirty or forty students, but what about the remaining hundreds? I faced this dilemma for several years until I realized I was asking the wrong set of questions. A CSUN colleague — Dr. Gordon Nakagawa — provided me a new framework that enabled me to ask a different set of questions.

Dr. Nakagawa served as my predecessor as Coordinator of the Faculty Mentor Program and is the pioneer in developing the valuable approach of "mentoring on the run." Like many great discoveries, Dr. Nakagawa uncovered this new approach accidentally. Faced with impending budget cuts and a reduction of resources that would severely restrict his program, he began investigating existing mentoring programs on campus with the goal of identifying those that were most successful and capable of cheaply being duplicated. What he found surprised him. Most existing programs involved one-to-one matching arrangements between faculty and students and required intensive amounts of time and resources to set up and maintain. Moreover, all these formal programs — while valuable — impacted a very small segment of CSUN students. Generally, most students who took part in existing programs were high-achieving students; in contrast, those students most in need of mentoring were largely ignored. At a time of budget cutbacks, how could the mission of mentoring be expanded to reach out to new students when the existing programs required even more funds just to maintain current work? Yet, as Dr. Nakagawa continued his investigation, he found another layer of mentoring that was invisible to most of the campus. In contrast to formal mentor programs, this version of mentoring occurred informally in hallways in short interactions between faculty and students. It took place in large lecture classes where skillful teachers inserted "mentoring moments" into

their lesson plans to reach out and help students that they would probably never have an

opportunity to meet individually. It happened in brief meetings of academic advisers with

students where the advisers helped students with personal problems while setting up their

academic schedules for the coming semester. As he interviewed more and more students, Dr.

Nakagawa learned about the powerful impact that these seemingly small interactions had on

students. Many students described the lasting impact of a professor's small words of

encouragement written on an essay or an adviser's warm greeting in a busy hallway during a

rough day in a semester. At a large, commuter campus such as CSUN, Dr. Nakagawa realized

that these forms of "informal mentoring" and "naturally-occurring mentoring" — and not the

expensive and difficult-to-maintain formal programs — were the basic mentoring building

blocks for changing the campus and impacting the student population as a whole. He coined the

term "mentoring on the run" to capture the essence of these interactions and spent the next two

years helping people on our campus heighten their consciousness about the power of these little

moments of mentoring and to train others in the new approach.[6]

I have been fortunate to inherit the legacy of Dr. Nakagawa's pioneering work. For the past

eight years, I have applied his concept to my work with EOP students, and I have trained many

others in the art of "mentoring on the run."[7] Of course, having others embrace this approach is

not easy because of the powerful impact that the colonial version of mentoring has on our

consciousness; we all unconsciously tend to define mentoring only in terms of "big moments"

through one-to-one, long-term relationships in formal programs. However, as people begin to

grasp Dr. Nakagawa's approach, they experience the feeling of liberation from the shift in

consciousness. Faculty, for example, see that mentoring is not something extra that they need to

add to their already heavy work loads but rather something that can be infused into their existing

work as teachers. Others realize that although they do not participate in formal mentoring

programs, they have been mentoring others all along through their daily interactions with others.

Others discover the powerful impact that their seemingly insignificant activities — such as brief

comments written on student papers or short conversations with students in a busy hallway —

have on the lives of students.

Thus, I now believe that "mentoring on the run" — rather than representing a stunted or limited

form of mentoring — is actually an advanced form of mentoring that is ideally suited to our

large, commuter campus. Moreover, it has important applications for activists organizing in

communities and workplaces where forging mentoring relationships is an essential tool for

mobilizing against injustices. By putting "mentoring on the run" in the foreground of our

consciousness, we can overcome the dominant colonial vision of mentoring by developing

awareness of a more powerful approach. But to fully understand this new approach, we need

two additional organizing principles: building a "community of mentors" and promoting a

"culture of mentoring" within that community.

Building a "Community of Mentors" and Promoting a "Culture of Mentoring"

As we develop our capacity to "mentor on the run," we begin to root out the deeply ingrained

colonial image of mentoring from our minds. Gradually, a new image takes shape — one that is

rooted in the reality of our work as teachers and activists. We begin to appreciate the powerful

little moments of mentoring that occur in our daily lives. We also begin to recognize that these little moments do not simply occur in relationships involving only two people; they occur within a web of relationships involving a community. When we begin to consciously build a community of mentors, we also begin to change the culture around us. Thus, the organizing principle of "mentoring on the run" is intricately tied to the companion principles of building a community of mentors and promoting a new culture of mentoring within that community.

When we are able to understand that mentoring relationships occur in a web of relationships (i.e., a community) rather than only in one-to-one relationships, our community becomes our resource for mentoring. The wisdom and experiences of others serve as resources we can mobilize when we are confronted by new and difficult challenges. We begin to realize that we do not have to solve these challenges individually or with the help of only one other person; we can literally draw from the wisdom of hundreds, and perhaps even thousands, of fellow mentors in our community. Focusing on building this community of mentors also helps us avoid the common problem of activist and mentor burn-out. Those activists and mentors who burn out are those who are most strongly influenced by the colonial mindset of activism and mentoring. They focus on mentoring as involving only one-to-one relationships, and they conceptualize activism as centering on the individual activist. They have not yet escaped from the powerful chains of colonialism binding their minds. At the conclusion of this essay, I return to this problem of mentor and activist burn-out. I focus on the transformative powers of mentoring — both in terms of society and the individual person. But in order to understand how building a community of mentors can also change the mindsets of individuals within that community, we

need to appreciate an often neglected factor: the culture of an organization, or more broadly, the culture of a community.

I have adopted the concept of organizational culture from the writings of Margaret Wheatley, especially her important book, *Leadership and the New Science*.[8] Wheatley draws from the insights of quantum physics, especially its critique of Newtonian physics, and uses these insights to create a new model for social change in our world today. Wheatley focuses on the important concept of "fields" and adapts this concept from physics to organizational and community culture. A field in physics is invisible but essential for the transformation of particles into waves and vice-versa. Similarly, a culture in an organization or in a community is largely invisible but essential for transformations of individuals within that culture and the group as a whole. Wheatley identifies the key elements that define the culture of an organization and a community. They are the values — both explicit and implicit — that distinguish that group from others. According to Wheatley, these values can either promote or hinder change. Thus, if we want to change an organization (or a community), we first need to identify its prevailing values. Similarly, the most effective strategy for changing an organization (or a community) is shifting the values and overall culture of that group, especially by introducing anti-colonial values. Changing the organizational culture can change the organization.

Earlier, I discussed the significant way that Huang and Lynch expanded our understanding of mentoring to emphasize "the giving and receiving of wisdom." According to Huang and Lynch, this transmission of wisdom occurs not simply between two individuals but within a network of

relationships.[9] Thus, as more and more people embrace this understanding of mentoring, a new culture emerges within this network. People essentially build a "community of mentors" around what Huang and Lynch would call a new culture of wisdom. This process of change often occurs invisibly because most times people are unaware of the "field" or culture they live in. But what if were to make the unconscious conscious and that which is largely invisible visible? Could we then consciously promote change by mobilizing the power of all within our community?

I believe that one way that we can promote a new culture of mentoring within our communities is to understand the critical role that group dynamics and energy generated by interpersonal interactions play in the process of change. These are factors most often ignored by leaders in large, hierarchical organizations and societies, who tend to initiate change in their organizations through a one-way flow of information (from top to bottom), the creation of new administrative positions, the redefinition of existing posts, and the reorganization of lines of authority in organizational flow charts. In contrast, Wheatley identifies the critical role of group dynamics in an organization. This is another invisible aspect of the organizational "field," or culture, of the group, and another critical force that can either hinder or facilitate change.

Thus, the organizing principles of "building a community of mentors" and "promoting a culture of mentoring" are closely intertwined. In the words of Huang and Lynch, mentoring relationships promote the transmission of wisdom throughout a community. This process of transmission creates a new culture of wisdom, which, in turn, serves as the foundation for the

community of mentors. As we become conscious of this new culture of mentoring that we are promoting, we expand our community of mentors.

The Impact of Mentoring on CSUN's EOP Bridge Program for Low-Income Freshmen

At CSUN, the organizing principles of "mentoring on the run," building a "community of mentors," and promoting a "culture of mentors" are not simply abstract principles; they have served as the foundation for reorganizing the EOP Residential Bridge Program for freshmen. I have been fortunate to be part of this program, both as a faculty member and part of the planning team headed by EOP leaders José Luis Vargas and Shiva Parsa. Today, the Bridge Program is emerging as an important model for promoting the success of low-income and academically under-prepared freshmen, not only at CSUN but across the nation.

Bridge was initially designed as a six-week summer transitional program to help academically deficient freshmen prepare for college classes. Through Bridge, students received academic instruction (i.e., two classes during a six-week summer session), tutoring, and life management advisement. The program's academic component was designed to assist under-prepared freshmen gain basic developmental skills in reading, writing, and study techniques as well as understand the value of diversity in society.

The Bridge Program serves CSUN's most at-risk student population: special-admit, low-income

freshmen, who are the first generation in their families to attend college. Many Bridge students

come from immigrant families. Others come from single-parent households, and still others are

foster children. Most have grown up in neighborhoods where drugs and gangs are common and

where young people are more likely to end up in prison, as unwed mothers, or in low-income

jobs than in college. Mentoring for this group of students is especially crucial for their academic

achievement and personal well-being. However, due to severe funding cutbacks, EOP leaders

José Luis Vargas and Shiva Parsa could not build Bridge around a traditional mentoring model

based on formal one-to-one matchings between faculty and students. They recognized the need

to adopt an imaginative new mentoring model built on the foundation of informal mentoring,

community-building, and the creation of a mentoring culture within that community. The vision

of Vargas and Parsa has transformed all aspects of Bridge, notably the student admissions

process, staff and faculty training, classroom pedagogy, and student advisement.[10] The following

points represent the main elements of this transformation:

- *The redefinition of the Bridge student population as "high potential" rather than "high risk.*
This redefinition is not simply a wording change but has influenced the way that faculty and staff
view students and the way that students in the program view themselves. Rather than seeing
Bridge as a "remedial" program for students at risk of failing in the university, all participants
(faculty, administrators, staff, and the students themselves) now define Bridge as an
opportunity that enables highly motivated but under-prepared students master basic academic
skills to succeed in the university.

- *The reorganization of Bridge and EOP admissions procedures around a holistic and
deliberative approach.* Currently, all Bridge students and all EOP students undergo a rigorous
admissions process, which includes not only completing written forms but also taking part in
group and/or individual interviews conducted by EOP staff. Bridge students, in particular, have

the understanding that their selection to participate in the summer program is based on demonstrating their motivation and "high potential" to become successful college students. EOP staff members are trained to use each step of the admissions process as a mentoring opportunity. In short, mentoring begins from the time that prospective students apply to CSUN. Through workshops, group interviews, and one-to-one interviews, EOP staff members give prospective students basic information about the university. However, these initial steps in the admissions procedure are not defined as simply information-giving. Students also are provided opportunities to reflect on challenges facing them and to talk about why their low grades in high school do not accurately reflect their character.

• *The creation of long-term learning communities during the summer and the continuation of these cohorts during the students' first three semesters in the university.* During the summer six-week session, students are organized into cohorts (of roughly 23 to 25 students) and taught by one faculty member. For one class in the following fall and spring semesters, students remain together as a cohort with their same instructor from the summer. This arrangement enables students to learn how to work closely together and to watch out for one another in their journeys toward academic success. It also allow faculty to implement a developmental teaching approach to academic skills mastery.

• *The emphasis on integrated and linked curriculum.* Currently, Bridge students take two summer classes: a Developmental Reading class and a Freshmen Seminar introducing them to academic requirements in the university. Both sets of classes are taught by the same instructor, and each faculty member is encouraged to link and integrate subject matter rather than teaching materials as two separate courses. By having faculty link and integrate subject matter from different classes, EOP administrators are encouraging faculty to serve as role models for Bridge students who must similarly find ways to link subject matter from different classes they take at the university.

• *An emphasis on a pedagogical approach for under-prepared freshmen that is rigorous and challenging as well as developmental and holistic while also addressing ethics and issues of diversity.* Bridge faculty are encouraged to take a rigorous developmental teaching approach that promotes basic skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking while at the same time assisting students to understand their choices and responsibilities as young adults and to appreciate diversity in the university and in the broader society. In other words, faculty do not "teach down" to the level of Bridge students but rather, guided by high academic expectations, help the students to develop academic skills over the course of a year together. The use of long-

term learning communities enables faculty to review and reinforce materials that they previously presented the term before and to construct new levels of learning on earlier concepts. As they become adept in understanding the power of long-term learning communities, faculty find themselves gaining from Bridge freshmen a higher quality of academic work than from freshmen in their other classes. Moreover, not only do Bridge students excel academically; through participation in long-term learning communities, they also gain the capacity to work well with others.

• *The introduction of Bridge learning community values.* All communities are built on a foundation of values, and the Bridge learning community is built around the values of respect, responsibility, maturity, and positive attitude. These four values were first articulated by Bridge Coordinator Shiva Parsa in 2003 and have now been incorporated into all aspects of program design. For example, during admission workshops and interviews, Bridge staff members emphasize these values to prospective students. In classrooms, faculty provide assignments that enable students to reflect on how well they are upholding these values as they take their journey in college. Thus, as students assimilate these values, they create a powerful new "field" or organizational culture that helps all members of the learning community succeed. Finally, inspired by these new values, Bridge students also want to "give back" to help the program; many volunteer in future years to work with new cohorts of Bridge freshmen.

• *The emphasis on the common function of mentoring in order to overcome the traditional separation in a university between academics, advisement, and residential life.* Traditionally within universities, there are barriers between personnel handling different functions, such as faculty teaching classes, student affairs officers handling advisement, tutors helping students with coursework, and resident advisors working with students in dorms. At times, these barriers can result in sharp conflicts. Training of personnel in Bridge now emphasizes the common function of mentoring as a way to overcome these traditional institutional barriers. By emphasizing mentoring, Bridge administrators have not only been able to minimize conflicts but also have demonstrated how forming a "community of mentors" and promoting a "culture of mentoring" can work in practice to raise student achievement.

• *The training of Bridge student support staff for the program — specifically, tutors, resident advisors, and student assistants — as peer mentors.* EOP hires upper-division students who are Bridge alumni as student support staff to serve as tutors, resident advisors, and office assistants to help incoming Bridge freshmen. Each of these categories of student workers has specific responsibilities in the Bridge Program; however, their common responsibility is to help entering

students understand how to succeed in the university. Bridge training workshops emphasize this common responsibility and promote the importance of teamwork among staff. Thus, the work of all student workers in the program is now conceptualized in terms of peer mentoring, and each tutor, resident advisor and student assistant is trained in recognizing each interaction with a Bridge student as an opportunity for mentoring.

• *Systematic follow-up with and ongoing assessment of Bridge students for three semesters following the summer program.* In conjunction with the long-term academic approach for Bridge instruction described above, EOP staff members systematically monitor students' progress for the critical three semesters following the summer program. EOP peer mentors also provide support services for students, including tutoring, academic advisement, and other forms of help.

What impact have all these changes in the design of Bridge had on the lives of students? In the California State University system, one of the common measures of success for freshmen is the retention rate following their critical first year in college. High numbers of freshmen fail or drop out during their first year, and administrators at various campuses have launched initiatives to improve retention rates. At CSUN in recent years, about 76% of freshmen who entered the university as "routinely eligible" students — i.e., meeting all CSU academic entrance requirements — were still in the university after their freshman year. Thus, nearly one-in-four of academically qualified freshmen had failed or dropped out. In contrast, Bridge freshmen in the same period attained retention rates of 83-89%. Remember that Bridge students are defined by the university as "at-risk" freshmen due to entering as "special-admit" freshmen who did not meet standard admissions criteria. For example, due to academic deficiencies, Bridge students must take remedial classes in math, reading, and writing during their first year and must pass these classes to remain at CSUN. However, despite these additional challenges, "at-risk" freshmen are now academically out-performing CSUN's regularly admitted population.

What accounts for the remarkable success of Bridge students? Many officials at our university hope to find one element in Bridge, such as the use of learning communities, the creation of linked curriculum, or the forging of close working relationships between faculty and staff in tracking student performance. However, EOP leaders Vargas and Parsa firmly believe there is no one magical element. Instead, they point to the combination of changes in admissions, pedagogy, and student advising that have led to a paradigm shift in the organization of Bridge. Underlying this paradigm shift is the infusion of mentoring into all aspects of the Bridge Program — from program definition to implementation, from staff training to program assessment, and from academic instruction to the provision of support services. Vargas and Parsa always emphasize how mentoring has become integrated into the daily interactions of faculty and support staff with students. Thus, the paradigm shift initiated in the Bridge Program in recent years — and the central role of mentoring in this paradigm shift — can serve as a valuable model for others grappling with the challenge of working with freshmen but only if others embrace it as a whole and not only its separate components.

The accomplishments of Bridge students at CSUN point to both the promise and the challenge of applying the organizing principles of "mentoring on the run," building a "community of mentors," and "promoting a culture of mentoring" to create large-scale change. Program changes required bold and visionary leaders who were willing to experiment with new approaches to mentoring. Program changes required transformations of not only all program components but also the mindset of individuals working in the program: faculty, staff, administrators, student peer mentors, and the students themselves. Changing mindsets is often much harder than changing programs. Mindsets are shaped by ideas from the dominant culture of society, and in our world today many continue to be influenced by the mindset of colonialism even without being aware of it. How can mentoring help us to break the chains of colonialism that bind out hearts, our minds, and our souls today?

Appreciating the Transformative Power of Mentoring

The fundamental task of the mentor is a liberatory task. It is not to encourage the mentor's goals and aspirations and dreams to be reproduced in the mentees, the students, but to give rise to the possibility that the students become the owners of their own history. This is how I understand the need that teachers have to transcend their merely instructive task and to assume the ethical posture of a mentor who truly believes in the total autonomy, freedom, and development of those he or she mentors.[11]
– Paulo Freire

According to Freire, mentoring is liberatory for those who are mentored. Mentoring enables them to transform their lives by becoming "owners of their own history." Mentors must always keep this goal in mind. Freire further reminds us that the act of mentoring should not be defined as instruction whereby one person strives to transmit knowledge to others; instead, the act of mentoring is largely ethical and centers on the autonomous development of those who are mentored. Through mentoring, a mentee becomes empowered. Yet, perhaps less well understood is how mentoring is also liberatory for those who mentor. The act of mentoring also transforms the lives of those who mentor, enabling them to further develop their own wisdom and share it with those around them. Thus, using Freire's insights, we can define mentoring as a reciprocal process for human development and liberation. Mentoring is a transformative force for the creation of a culture of wisdom that changes our lives and the lives of all around us. In the communities where we live and work, how can we foreground this vision of mentoring? How can we emphasize mentoring as a transformative force for both mentors and mentees?

In the mentor training that I do, I emphasize the reciprocal nature of mentoring relationships, pointing out the transformative benefits for both mentors and mentees.[11] Two questions that I ask during training

workshops are: "What do those that you mentor gain from you?" and "What do you as mentors gain from mentoring others?" The answers to these questions distinguish those who are experienced mentors from those who are inexperienced. Inexperienced mentors tend to see mentoring as mainly giving; thus, they can quickly list what others gain from them but have difficulty describing what they gain from others. In contrast, experienced mentors understand mentoring as both giving and receiving and can readily identify what they gain from others. In fact, most experienced mentors state that they receive far more than they give.

Why is it so important to appreciate mentoring as both giving and receiving? Understanding mentoring as a reciprocal process prevents burn-out, a common malady faced by young activists and mentors. Those who burn out are those who see their work as mainly giving — whether in terms of educating others or organizing in neighborhoods or workplaces. In contrast, those who never burn out are those who are sustained by their activities in mentoring and organizing. In their work as educators, they focus on all they learn from those they teach. In their work as activists, they are able to identify all they receive back from others in the years they devote to organizing in communities and workplaces. While inexperienced mentors struggle to identify that which they can gain from those they mentor, experienced mentors state that what they receive from others enhances and further fuels their work.

Intellectually, it is fairly easy to convince inexperienced mentors of the need to see mentoring as both giving and receiving. But it is much harder for beginning mentors to carry out this understanding in practice. As a result, they are unable to appreciate the transformative powers of mentoring on their own lives through the gifts of wisdom they receive from others. How, then, can we tackle this problem? My own mentors taught me a simple approach that I now incorporate into my own workshops. My mentors encouraged me to take the time to reflect of what I was gaining by working with others. They reminded

me that in western society it is always easier to identify what I, as an activist, am doing for others and far more difficult to identify what others are doing for me. My mentors urged me to do this type of reflection regularly — daily, weekly, or every two weeks; the important thing was that it be done regularly. Once done regularly, it would become a habit, and I would begin to see all that I was receiving from those around me. Today, I use this approach to help beginning mentors understand what they are constantly gaining from those they help.

However, appreciating what we gain from mentoring others is only the first step in the larger task of changing our consciousness and freeing ourselves from the legacy of colonialism. As we appreciate mentoring as a reciprocal relationship, we need to shift our attention away from the mentor or the mentee and focus instead on the importance of the relationship forged between them. More broadly, we begin to recognize the invisible web of relationships linking many mentors and those they mentor within a network or a community. These relationships are reciprocal and dynamic — with mentors and mentees constantly changing positions. Through this dynamic interplay, people transform themselves and the culture of their community.

Appreciating mentoring as a reciprocal process that transforms the lives of all involved enables us to create a new image in our minds that truly captures the approach to mentoring needed in our world today. Rather than the old western colonial image of an old sage transmitting knowledge to a single, young disciple, we can envision a web of people linked through intertwined relationships. In this web, people are constantly changing roles between being mentors and being mentored. This new image of mentoring, I believe, already corresponds to what is actually occurring in our communities. However, because our consciousness is still blocked by the legacy of colonialism, we cannot yet see it. The time has come to

change the situation. The time has come to change our consciousness by breaking the chains of

colonialism on our hearts, minds, and souls. The time has come for a liberatory vision of mentoring.

Notes

1. Chungliang Al Huang and Jerry Lynch, *Mentoring: The Tao of Giving and Receiving Wisdom*
   (New York: Harper Collins, 1995).

2. For a longer description of the ways that colonialism affects the ways that activists today
   conceptualize organizing and social change, see Glenn Omatsu, "Expanding the Ways That We
   Can Learn and Teach Asian American Studies: A Self-Exploration,"
   http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/aasc/classweb/winter05/aas116/hw2sample.htm.

3. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1971); Lev Vygotsky,
   Mind in Society (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Margaret Wheatley,
   Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World (San Francisco:
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