

Handles on a cutting board
The value of Mentors in our lives
By Ed Landry

And you should follow my example as I follow Christ's. (1 Cor 11:1)

I imagine most of our lives are a series of awakenings. One of my big ones came during my latter college days. By the time I entered my senior year at San Diego State, I was a decent athlete and grades in school came easily. Actually, too easy. I spent much of my time at the beach when real students studied. My years in college were fun, and I squeaked by doing almost no homework. But I did have a good tan. Before you are too tough on me you have to remember I am from California. We are sometimes called the Granola state, the land of fruits, nuts and flakes. And when it comes to trendsetters, we may be the undisputed world champions. We have the honor of being the home of the Christian Surfer Association. Yes, the only group in the world that addresses God as the Great Gnarly Dude. So go light on me. I am a product of my environment which means, in psychological terms, if the sun is out, who wants to study?

One problem with not applying myself was that even in the classes I liked, I didn't learn much because I was goofing off most of the time. My major was Industrial Arts. That is the educational term. It was really "shop class." Woodworking became my specialty. I still remember my big assignment in Wood 101. We could make any project we wanted with one board foot of lumber. I decided to make a cutting board, one foot square and one inch thick. How is that for imagination? But it gets better. The undertaking stretched into six weeks as I hinted that I was not real strong in applying myself to anything except surfing. The word "underachiever" in the dictionary had my photo next to it.

My only creative moment was to get special permission to use two different types of wood. The finished cutting board was laminated with alternating stripes of walnut and maple and had four tiny wooden feet on the bottom and two large clunky metal handles on the top. It looked like a zebra that had gone through a trash compactor. You are probably convinced by this time that I was into drugs. No, I just didn't know what I was doing. But I did like wood work.

If anyone with a sense of design had seen that monstrosity I made, I might have been burned at a stake in public. Today I don't know what finally happened to that awful thing. I gave it to my mother and I never saw it again after that. I think she made sure it was well buried in the trash can so the garbage truck would take it. Yes, the mother, who still had my mosaic duck from ninth grade art class, reached her tolerance level and my college masterpiece was no more. I am telling this story to give the background for what happened a few years later that changed my life and my self-confidence.

One of my neighborhood buddies got a job at a small custom furniture shop when I was in my last part of college. I can't really tell you if I was a junior or senior because I just meandered through school like life, and I never knew what I was. One day I took my last

class and I was done. Now, back to my friend who got that job. I was jealous and begged him to ask if I could work at that same shop. I have no idea what kind of story he told the boss, but he hired me. I was a total dweeb. I hadn't learned much in college except what the tide and surf tables meant and my woodworking major had left me mostly uneducated. But as I said, I liked wood. Surprisingly, the idea of working in a woodworking shop interested me, and I actually started applying myself. I only hoped I would get a few skills before they discovered what they had hired and take me out behind the building and shoot me (sometimes known as acute lead poisoning). I tried my best and started to improve. They gave me simple jobs at first, which was very fortunate. Lee, the owner was a very encouraging and tolerant person. He saw hope in the dweeb. His trust in me made me want to try harder. He was an exceptional man but this particular story is really about a guy named Doug Foster.

Turning Point

Doug was different from the crowd I ran with. He didn't have a tan so I was suspicious from the start. He was focused and always seemed to know what he was doing and what he would be doing next. My life was like driftwood. Doug's life was driven by vision and artistic balance. I envied him. Doug was a graduate from the same college I attended, but he had paid attention. He was a few years older and many years more mature. He was one of the first Christians I ever met, and he was a master craftsman. He was a man going somewhere, and I hadn't even looked at the map.

Well, one day towards the close of a work day he asked if I wanted to join him after we shut down. He was going to stay for an extra hour to make a gift for his wife. I hadn't been married very long at that point, and he was thoughtful enough to include me in his project. He told me I could make one for my wife. I asked him what he was going to make in one hour. He said, "A cutting board." I think I stopped breathing. I stared blankly. It was as Yogi Berra said, "Déjà vu all over again." "Did you say one hour, Doug?" "Are they going to have handles on the top, feet on the bottom and look like a squashed zebra?" Could a cutting board be made in less than six weeks? So I agreed mostly out of curiosity. Anyway, my mom would take it if it flopped; she needed a new lid for her trash can.

That evening between five and six p.m., my life changed. Doug had designed (a formerly unknown word to me) a simple Danish modern, teardrop-shape cutting board made from teak with a rosewood strip in it and a small rawhide hanging strap on the end. It was beautiful. And the food wouldn't get wrapped around the handles. We made two in one hour. When they were finished we oiled them with vegetable oil and took them home to our wives. I imagine Doug calmly and confidently handed his to his wife without much of a thought. But I had a different experience. I trembled as I drove home and began to feel something strange happening. It was something I had never felt before. It was my brain waking up. It was my life waking up. I didn't even care if the surf was big.

Have you ever had a secret you carried that made you want to burst? That described me that night. When I walked into the house with a plain plastic bag holding the little masterpiece, I must have been beet red and my eyes were bulging out of their sockets.

My wife noticed my unusual blowfish countenance and said “what’s up.” I said, “Oh, nothing much.” What’s in the bag?” “Oh, it’s just a little something I made at the shop tonight for you.” “Really, let me see it.” “Ohhh, OK, here.” Silence. Lots of silence. Birth is a stunning moment.

I made that cutting board in one hour. It was beautiful. I did it. What did my wife say? I can’t remember because I was staring at what I had done and was even more amazed than she was. She probably said something like, “you incredible hunk of a man, this is your lucky night.” But all I could see was what I was able to do in such a short time. It was a metamorphosis, dweeb to achiever. A mentor had dragged my sorry carcass into the light, and I was never the same after that. Doug, you have no idea what that cutting board did to me that night.

Today I look back at an incredible journey. I became a building contractor, firefighter, cabinetmaker, and Bible teacher that has traveled to all continents except Antarctica teaching pastors and Christian leaders around the world. When we worked with impoverished churches, we designed a church-based enterprise program to help them become self-supporting when formerly they had no hope of surviving. Yep, this old dweeb got his life together, and I can trace my current personality and skills to that cutting board and that night of awakening. I was a goof-off surfer and woodworker wannabe. Today I am a graphic designer, writer, Bible teacher, builder, entrepreneur, publisher, international director of a Christian development agency, and a parent of five kids that surprisingly have similar traits. Of course my wife would add, “One hunk of a man” so I have to put that on the list at her insistence.

What happened to me? Doug showed me what I could be. Thanks Doug. Doug was a mentor. Mentors change people. We need mentors. We need to be mentors. My journey and joy of Leukemia is what it is today because of mentors. They made me an upper and not a downer. They made a can-do person. They helped me discover my spiritual gift of vision and to develop it. They showed me the joy of creativity, which helped me find solutions in the hard times. Other mentors modeled a life that was victorious in suffering. They were pathfinders. Others helped me lay a strong foundation that would stand against the onslaught of a terminal disease. My awakening happened when a guy took me aside one night for one hour and showed me I was worth something.

Doug was really the first life changer I encountered. He prepared me to be ready to hear the gospel. All he did was pay attention to me. There were others who came along in my life that left me different from the way they found me, and I want to give a short tribute to a few of them.

Bert taught me so much. He was the most practical Christian I ever met in my life. He loved the Word so much, it bubbled out of him all day long. He was funny and wise. He taught me to love the great hymns. He taught me how to be practical in my balance of the ridiculous and the sublime. He was joy personified. He always had time to talk, no matter how busy he was. He was generous with others, and yet directed his mission agency from a converted goat stable. I guess more than one good thing has started in a stable. He told

me once he wanted to hand over his last check as they slammed the lid, and he lived that way, frugal for himself and generous to others. I wanted to become a missionary because of him. He made me want to be a better Christian. He made me unsatisfied with a normal life. Bert crossed the finish line like an Olympic champion and is with Jesus today. I miss you, old friend. I will be breaking that tape soon too, and I am so glad you showed me how.

Jim taught me about prayer. I have never known anyone to pray like him. When Jim goes to his prayer closet God says, "Hi Jim." When I go to mine God says, "Well, look what the dog dragged in. Quick, someone check my pulse!" You are a good and patient mentor, Jim; I am just not the best student. But your time on your knees has changed me for the better and has helped me stand through many storms.

Paul taught me how a teacher can challenge a person to develop a passion for the Word. While in Bible school, I literally ran to his classes even on the icy sidewalks of Alberta. When he taught, I could feel my eyes widening and the hair on the back of my neck standing up. I felt like the two on the road to Emmaus when they said, "Didn't our hearts feel strangely warm as he talked with us . . . and explained the Scriptures to us." (Luke 24:32). He was like the Jordan, deep and wide. He stretched my spirit and helped me soar to new heights. I have had many great teachers help me along life's path but Paul swept my hungry soul into the heavenlies. Thank you, Paul. Your humility and rich depth in the word impacted me forever and made me want to teach others like that. You know after Bible school, I never did go back to surfing. Not that surfing is bad it just became so insignificant.

Doug #2 Doug Nichols came into my life during Bible School. He was more than the director of the mission agency we were to join. Much more. He modeled what a godly leader looks like. I saw in him a man that was selfless and generous. To Doug I say this, "Brother, if I can just turn out a small bit like you, God will hug me so hard he will break my ribs when I get to heaven. You were the mentor for my cancer. When you got it and were given two months to live, I ached and prayed. You were unafraid and expectantly looked to heaven and were almost disappointed when the cancer left you. It was like it gave you a supercharge for the Lord that has not worn off for all these years. I want that kind of charge. When I found out I was going to die, you were with me in the room. You had tears in your eyes. You understood. You ached and you prayed. One of the greatest privileges in my life has been to be your friend. Thank you, Doug. You have definitely changed my life. I have traveled across India and the Philippines with you. I have seen you sleep in a wheelbarrow to give someone else a bed. I have watched you respond in humility, when falsely accused and love people who hurt you. He are so generous that you even give away other peoples things to those who have need. In case you ever forget, let me remind you of the time I was in India with you and you were talking to an Indian evangelist. You asked the man if he had a watch. The man said no. So you reached over and took my watch off and gave it to the man. Now that is generosity. Well, I think that is what it is. That is Doug. I guess I should explain to readers that you had already given your watch away to another pastor. Every time we met a pastor on that trip, I was afraid

you were going to ask him if he owned any underwear. Today I have another watch. I am afraid to go anywhere with you."

And there were others along the way. My dad never went past eighth grade. He had to work to support his siblings and parents during the depression. He learned early on not to get in debt, and he passed that on to me. I learned the lesson. Just that lesson alone has radically altered my life. If I hadn't learned that I never would have gone to the mission field. Many people who want to go into missions today can't because of debt.

I learned early in my marriage the dangers of becoming unfaithful from a friend who had failed, and the story he told me scared me so much, it never left my mind. I am glad that I learned from that tragedy. God's counselors are all around us if we will just listen. It doesn't matter what our questions or needs are, there is someone with the answer probably very close by. There are things we need to know that are like treasures and they are hidden in people.

I hope you get what I am trying to communicate about mentors. If you have not had many people in your life who have taken you under their wing, I am not trying to make you feel bad. Just the opposite. What I want you to see is that we can sometimes make significant impact in the lives of others with the simplest things. I am a changed person today because a person invited me to make a cutting board with him. I may not even have gone to the mission field and would have missed the past 20 years of this incredible journey if that seemingly insignificant evening had not happened. How many people do you know that need a moment of encouraging? Just a word of praise, a pat on the back, or even a kick in the keester. They need you and you need to help them. Be a mentor.

"Older women must train the younger women to love their husbands and their children, to live wisely . . . and in the same way encourage the young men to live wisely in all they do." (Titus 2:4-6)

I have tried to imagine where I would be today if I had not spent that one hour in the cabinet shop that night. I would probably be trying to pay for cancer treatments by marketing cutting boards with handles on top.