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Mentoring Matters

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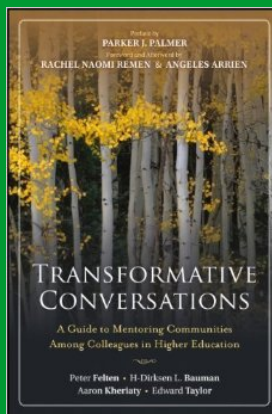
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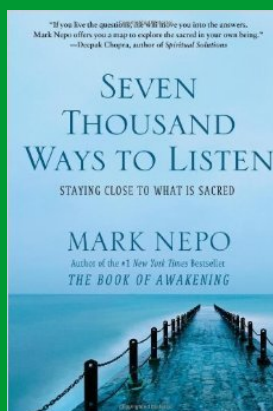
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Books that Sharon Recommends!



"This book, spawned by a mentoring initiative of the Fetzer Institute, is an inspiring and practical account of how any individual or organization can seed and practice a mentoring imagination, while at the same time gaining greater meaning, purpose, and effectiveness."



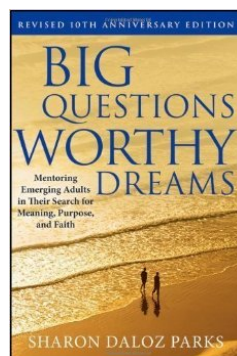
Interview with Sharon Daloz Parks

Leadership for the New Commons and Author, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning Purpose and Faith.

Sharon Daloz Parks, author, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning Purpose and Faith.*

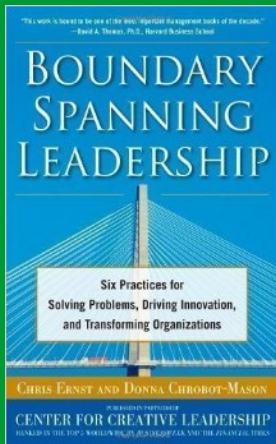
She is principal, *Leadership for the New Commons* and a senior fellow at the Whidbey Institute. She has held faculty and research positions at Harvard University including a senior research fellow at the Harvard Business School and in the Leadership Education Project at the Kennedy School of Government.

MM: Why the title "Big Questions and Worthy Dreams?" Where does that come from and how does it relate to the gifts and promise of mentoring that you describe in your book?

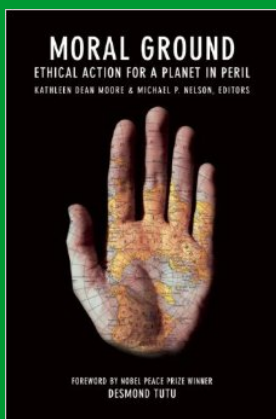


SDP: There are two central tasks in the emerging adult (twenty-something) years. The first is that emerging adults are ripe for becoming critical thinkers who can also think systemically. This is, of course, a very big deal. The capacity, as it were, to step outside of one's own thought and wonder, "Why do I think this way?" along with the capacity to recognize that everything is connected to everything else is vital. In an increasingly complex and diverse world, adulthood requires this kind of critical-systemic thought in the workplace, in personal decision-making, and in responsible citizenship. Learning how to think in these ways is fostered, in part, by initiation into "big-enough" questions. I discovered that many of our emerging adults (even many of those whom we presume are the most privileged) are being cheated, because no one is asking them the big questions of their lives and their wider world.

"The most striking feature of Yoda is the size of his ears. Listening is the heart of mentoring, and Nepo is an extraordinary guide to that art. Moreover, he asks the kinds of big questions that can stir us into the depth of listening that great mentoring requires."



"It has been said that in today's world our most vexing challenges cannot be solved by any sector alone; a cross-boundary imagination must become a hallmark of competent mentoring."



"A worthy companion on our shared, steep learning curve."

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The second central task of emerging adulthood is the formation of a "worthy dream" of what one's adulthood might be. Emerging adults are very vulnerable to the dreams that are (and are not) made available to them. A "worthy dream" honors the unique potential of the emerging adult life and the needs and best aspirations of his or her society.

MM: Why focus on emerging adult years? Is mentoring different for them than for adults?

SDP: Emerging adulthood is precisely the right time for Yoda to show up! As an emerging adult develops the awareness that it doesn't work to trust assumed authorities outside the self, he or she becomes curious about "how we know really" and discovers that becoming adult requires joining the arena of Authority. Mentors can give you confidence that you will make it through this transition. Mentors provide good company as one learns how to listen to one's own inner voice as well as to the many voices of authority. In other words, emerging adults have the task of re-examining previous assumptions and composing a "faith" to live by, whether finally expressed in secular or spiritual-religious terms. They must learn how to make meaning and seek place and purpose in an uncertain world, sorting out what is and isn't true and what they can and can't ultimately count on in a complex, diverse, and morally ambiguous world.

In this process, there are at least five things that good mentors provide on behalf of the development of emerging adults:

- Recognition - a mentor sees you as you are, and as you could become.
- Support - a mentor may provide support of varying kinds- emotional, practical/how to, financial, advocacy, networking, etc.
- Challenge - a mentor asks big questions, offers work that stretches you, and may demand various forms of responsibility.
- Inspiration - a mentor inspires you to reach for Dreams that truly matter.
- Accountability - a good mentor does not exploit the protégé, and a good mentor knows how to hold on, let go, and stick around.

Mentoring, understood in this way, can make all the difference in whether an emerging adult merely goes with the flow and ends up "wherever" or discovers the distinctive potential of his or her life.

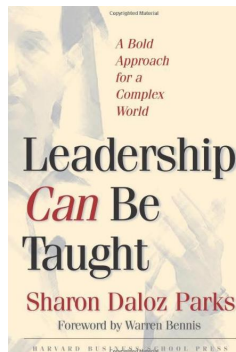
MM: You describe "culture as mentor." Our past two issues have dealt with this important issue. How do you see the interplay of the two?

SDP: "Culture" is closely linked to "cultivation." A culture is composed of the forms of life by which a people cultivate and maintain a sense of meaning, thus giving shape and significance to their experience. Culture unfolds in its politics - that is, in the whole complex of relationships among people in their society-in forms both mundane and sublime (symbols, language, institutions, art, practices, customs, and habits). Culture creates and teaches "how things are" and "what is worthy of life and commitment."

It has been said that the test of a culture is its capacity to receive its idealistic youth. We might add that the test of a culture is whether or not our emerging adults are characterized by idealism or cynicism, hope or despair, power or powerlessness. Michael Meade has written:

"When the passionate, boundless energy of our youth is wasted through the failure of our culture to give meaningful direction and care, we all court disaster. Without elders, who grasp and protect the mysterious core of culture, inner purpose and spirit do not get valued and acknowledged by an appropriate community and people feel like victims and act like outcasts." A culture coheres across time through the protection, maintenance, and evolution of that "mysterious core"- values and practices that animate the ongoing imagination of life. Mentors can play a big role in mediating that mysterious core of culture in ways that animate and support the best (or worst) imagination of the next generations.

MM: You've also written books on leadership. What is the connection between mentorship and leadership as you see it?



SDP: I believe that mentoring is one of the primary features of the art and practice leadership. As the head of a prominent national organization reflected, "I should have five people who could step into my role, and five people who could step into the roles of the seven key people who work with me." The adaptive challenges that are now upon us such as climate disruption and a global economy-unprecedented conditions calling us to steep learning curves and collective responses that manifest transformative innovation-all require more than routine management and long-term commitment across generations. Adaptive leadership, as I describe in the book, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World*, requires partners, allies, and an informed courage. At this hinge-time in history, it is tragic if emerging adults are mentored merely into keeping things the way they are; equally tragic if we fail to engage their energies into the hard and good work ahead.

MM: Your work introduces the concept of mentoring communities. What are they and how do we go about creating and sustaining them?

SDP: What we have come to recognize is that in ordinary time, a mentor who assists an emerging adult up the corporate ladder or otherwise mentors a protégé into the profession, guild, or society as it now is will be a gift that is "enough." But we do not live in ordinary time. We live at a great hinge point in history when institutions and cultures are being profoundly reordered. In our time, "a" mentor is not enough-only a "mentoring environment", or a "mentoring community" is enough. We are social creatures, and if emerging adults are going to have the courage to create new pathways and be mentored into the corporation, profession, guild, or society as it could become, they must know that they will not be alone. There will be a "we" - that is, more than me-and-my-mentor.

This means that we want to be asking whether our workplaces, institutions, organizations, classrooms, families, and communities function as "mentoring environments." Do these environments in which emerging adults are present and influenced function in the same way that good mentors do? Does the workplace, for example, provide recognition, support, challenge, and inspiration in ways that are accountable to the promise and vulnerability of emerging adult lives? If not, how does the organization become conscious of its collective power to encourage, orient, and shape emerging adult lives in ways that are meaningful and lasting, not only on behalf of individual lives but on behalf of our society as a whole? This will require mentoring

consciousness across the organization, and it can be cultivated over time through creating language and practices that nurture the mentoring capacities of everyone.



Leadership Development Services | 3042 E. Sierra Vista Drive | Phoenix | AZ | 85016