CHAPTER 1

What Is a Formation Mentoring Community?

Formation mentoring communities (FMCs) are opportunities for a small group of colleagues to explore their individual hopes, aspirations, and purposes and to reflect on their common problems, challenges, or concerns. An FMC is a time and place to be in conversation with others who are holding our deepest well-being at heart, who have no vested interest other than contributing to the best that we all can be. It is a place of safety where we find acceptance and are listened to generously, where we don't have to fight for space or limited resources. This makes these groups different from our typical ways of working and talking together in higher education.

While FMCs initially may feel like unfamiliar terrain, we have found that they are not an alien landscape to many of us. The ecology of these groups—formation, mentoring, and community—has deep roots in higher education. In this chapter,

we explain how our conversations and readings led us to understand the potential and promise of FMCs.

From Our FMCs:

Reimagining the University

I would like to see a revolution where we recreate our university as a humane place that truly lives up to its mission statement to be "an academic community that transforms mind, body, and spirit and encourages freedom of thought and liberty of conscience." This always seems more possible to me after one of our formation mentoring community conversations than … after a faculty meeting.

Formation

Since our group began our conversation by sitting under a sign reading "Formation," we initially spent a lot of time wrestling with that concept. For some of us, *formation* invoked a rich and honorable lineage of human learning and development, while others were wary of some of those same traditions, wondering if formation must necessarily lead to a particular intellectual or spiritual outcome. Because the word *formation* is often absent from higher education today, we reached back to read and discuss texts, many of which claimed not only that formation is a component of education but that all education is formation.

Over time we came to understand formation as a process that involves the integral development of the whole person: intellectual, emotional, professional, moral, and spiritual. Formative education focuses on supporting people in developing their shared human

capacities, sometimes framed as strengths and virtues, as well as cultivating each person's particular gifts and talents. This contrasts with the deformative processes that may occur in higher education, bending us away from our aspirations or limiting our capacities by confusing criticism with learning, specialization with progress, and practicality with purpose.

The formation process includes cultivating a sense of meaning in one's work. For some it may include discerning and responding to a life calling or vocation. Formation requires an honest search and open desire for greater self-knowledge and so is premised on a commitment to engage in self-examination. It involves not only an awareness of one's personal strengths or talents but also a humble recognition of areas of weakness and vulnerability. The process of formation promotes good habits of mind and heart, ways of seeing clearly and acting well. Formation is the work of a lifetime; our formation is never finished. However, formation may not always be an intentional process about which we are fully and consciously aware. Our identities and characters are forming all the time through our experiences, our decisions, and our actions.

> We often forget the grandeur of the world we inhabit as well as the mystery of our lives. The simple act of stopping to reflect, and then of holding our awareness—gently but firmly—on these forgotten dimensions of the world and our lives is a service and even a duty.
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> *Arthur Zajonc,* Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry

In the wisdom traditions that guided our conversations, we noticed that formational work often builds on threshold experiences. In mythology, this sometimes is represented by being at the water's edge or coming to a gate. Do you cross into the unfamiliar or step back into what is known? Crossing the threshold involves

the conscious awareness of a liminal moment or event, a significant juncture that may call for change, transition, reassessment, or conversion. These experiences typically cause individuals to face fear and even failure; however, they also can become times of previously unrecognized resilience, strength, or virtue. They can be times of growth, even transformation.

One goal of FMCs is to help us recognize these threshold moments and support us in acting with purpose when we stand on the brink and as we go about our daily work.

Mentoring

The most common approach to mentoring in higher education assumes that the mentor possesses some knowledge that can be communicated, modeled, or in some other way passed on to the protégé. In graduate programs and across the academy, students are often mentored into a ''craft'' or ''trade'' (to use these terms very broadly) by faculty advisors. Conventional mentoring programs for staff and faculty, where they exist at all, typically involve pairing a junior person with a senior colleague. The latter instructs the former on the ins and outs of the institution and the field, giving practical advice on career advancement. Such mentoring is important. You want your orthopedic surgeon to have been trained by the best teachers; you want the historian who wrote the book you're reading to be skilled in her craft. Mentoring as apprenticeship is necessary in education and professional life.

Formation mentoring goes beyond these more focused and end-oriented practices. It is not merely imparting information or helpful advice; it is not imposing ready-made solutions from the outside on complex professional or personal situations. Formation mentoring comes from a deeper notion of mentoring. To borrow a metaphor

from Socrates, for whom all learning is but remembering, the mentor is like a midwife. The mentor gives birth to knowledge by drawing out what was already implicit within the one being mentored. In the course of this kind of Socratic inquiry, answers and solutions may emerge that the person had not previously seen. This kind of mentoring has as much to do with listening, with what might be called conversational hospitality, as with talking and instruction.

> Mentoring is as much (or more) about asking the right kinds of questions as it is about giving sage advice. A good mentor poses "questions that go straight to the heart and the heart of the matter. . . The mentor knows that each life has a distinctive contribution to make to our common life, and if this contribution is not made, a life is diminished and the commons is impoverished.
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> *Sharon Parks,* Big Questions, Worthy Dreams

Sharon Parks, a leader in the field and practice of mentoring, has described the five essential gifts of mentoring as recognition (being seen and heard), support, challenge, inspiration, and accountability. We never outgrow our need for this constellation of gifts within our personal and professional lives, and FMCs provide a context in which we as professionals within higher education can offer these gifts to each other.

Thus, another important and distinctive feature of FMCs, which contrasts with more typical mentoring arrangements, is that the entire group (the mentoring community) and each of the group's constituent members mentor one another. While one or two people may have initiated the FMC and some members might be more experienced than others, no one within the group is designated as mentor or protégé. Rather, mentoring within an FMC is relational: each person is a mentor to the others, and each

person is being mentored by the others. This requires a community of trust and honesty, something that is not always present in more hierarchical mentoring relationships.

Community

Formation mentoring flourishes in, indeed requires, a particular kind of community—one aimed toward formation and nurtured by a certain kind of conversation. Work in higher education can often be isolating (writing, reading, grading, researching, prep, and more prep) and exhausting (participating in committees, task forces, councils, and more committees). All of this is important and necessary for maintaining the integrity of our disciplines and institutions. But it can also be draining, fraught with tension as people jockey for position and power, and tiring as people spend inordinate time on seemingly trivial topics. Isolation, or being together only in tense or exasperating ways, is a significant barrier to meaningful relationships and communities on campuses.

To counter this common experience, we recognized the need to cultivate deliberately different relationships and communities—ones that nurture rather than deplete. This is precisely the central aim of FMCs: to create a new and different sort of space among colleagues. The FMC's purpose is to contribute to the ongoing formation of the individual and the community in higher education.

For the four of us, our campus FMC groups have become that: places to renew and recharge, to remind ourselves why we do our work and what we aspire to in our lives. Formation mentoring communities enable us to find moments to come together and connect. Formation mentoring rises in this space and then flows out to fill the many cracks in the rest of our professional and personal

lives. The foundation of a deeper relationship created through these periodic conversations creates a wellspring of support.

Relationships are the hinge on which FMCs turn. The collegial friendships that develop in these small communities, characterized by solidarity, concern, reciprocity, and mutual respect, provide the context for the work of formation. So in an important sense, the formation of these genuine communities is as important as the individual formation that takes place within them. An FMC provides on a small scale a space, a commons, where members are no longer "bowling alone" (to borrow Robert Putnam's memorable phrase).[1]

> Each citizen should play his part in the community according to his individual gifts.
>
> *Plato*

We recognize that we may sound hopelessly old-fashioned by conscripting words like *formation, mentoring*, and *community*. To be sure, there has been a degradation of our language, such that these once-noble concepts have been hollowed out. Even the words *academy* and *academia* have suffered corrosive influences: "that's merely academic" is a dismissive way of indicating that the thing in question is divorced from everyday reality or from the concerns of reasonable people. The word rarely evokes, as it once did, one of civilization's most noble and foundational enterprises.

Rather than making an academic (there's that word again) argument in favor of recovering what is good and noble in all of these terms, we propose that the practice of participation in an FMC may be what is needed to counter the stresses and the cynicism that are prevalent in higher education. Among other things, perhaps the quiet and persevering work of FMCs—communities where

participants use sustained conversation to assist one another in pursuing a life of purpose and meaning—can help to revitalize not only our language in higher education but also the rich and worthy aspirations that such words were meant to convey.

One of the surprising outcomes of our FMC experience is the gentle but persistent reminder that there is more to life, more to our careers, than the minutiae of daily work. Through participating in the FMCs and engaging in these mentoring conversations, we are better able to see the connections between the hourly tasks and the larger direction of our work. This in turn can remind us to hold both ourselves and our institutions accountable, not just to a personnel committee or an accrediting body, but to our larger mission of transforming our students and shaping our world. While such a large task of social transformation may be so daunting that individual effort seems pointless, those of us in education are used to working on the scale of one student at a time. There is no reason, though, to forget the formation of ourselves and our colleagues along the way, one individual at a time.

Contrasting FMCs with Other Groups

One way to gain an appreciation for the unique nature of FMCs is to contrast them with other groups. FMCs are markedly different from the typical committees that are familiar to all in higher education. A committee has institutional mandates and goals, specific tasks to complete, a clearly delineated agenda, and a leader who chairs the meeting. Committee members often jostle for position and advocate for their own interests. In a committee, each of us is expected to always bring our competence and expertise, rarely our questions or doubts, and never our struggles or vulnerabilities. Committees play important roles in higher education,

but few academics want yet another committee on their list of weekly or monthly obligations. Committees typically take from participants and give back little in return. An FMC, by contrast, is a cooperative, egalitarian arrangement that focuses on the good of group members themselves rather than on external outcomes or achievements.

FMCs also differ from therapeutic groups. The members of an FMC offer one another forms of support, and in this way, the group may be indirectly therapeutic in the broad sense of the word. But group therapy is designed to focus on participants' emotional wounds and disorders; it aims to directly assess and heal such wounds. An FMC, by contrast, exists to help participants explore, form, articulate, and live out their values. By taking an interest in each other, asking open and nonjudgmental questions, and listening attentively, FMC members encourage one another to grow professionally and personally. In an FMC, the focus is on strengths and virtues rather than wounds and weaknesses. Vulnerabilities are acknowledged and accepted, but the group's purpose is to encourage our capacities, explore our hopes and aspirations, and inspire our work.

The Lineage of FMCs

Our concepts and practices of FMCs developed gradually over the course of our three years together. We were influenced along the way by the work of others who have made important contributions to the theory and practice of dialogue, mentoring, and formation in higher education. When the six of us convened for the first time as part of a larger gathering of educators, we had recently read Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajonc's *The Heart of Higher Education*. Our initial discussions about integrative education were

encouraged by their call to a more holistic approach to our work, and more attention to "first and last things."[2] To reach beyond the practical and mundane, Palmer and Zajonc reminded us, we must rethink the very foundations of learning and knowledge and the very purposes of higher education.

As we probed the relationship between formation and education, we recognized that the concept of educating the whole person found a ready home in intuitions inspired, for example, by the work of Ignatius of Loyola. But could a concept like formation of the whole person, in contrast to education focused solely on the intellect, find a home in diverse institutions and settings? Many philosophers and educators, from Plato and Socrates through the contemporary advocates for educating global citizens and ethical leaders, have maintained that it can and must. Along these lines, we discussed early in our project whether universal values could or must ground this work of formation. Among other sources, we considered the work of scholars in the positive psychology movement (e.g., Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson) who make the case for universal human character strengths and virtues that are conducive to happiness and human flourishing.[3] We also discussed Alasdair MacIntyre's claim in his book, *After Virtue*, that the development of these virtues occurs not so much as an individualistic project of self-improvement, but rather in the context of communities characterized by shared practices, ends, and aspirations—communities like those that exist (or should exist) in our institutions of higher education.[4]

Our focus on community and formation contrasts with most of the literature on mentoring in higher education. Lois J. Zachary's influential books, for example, offer a coaching model of mentoring that, while moving away from traditionally hierarchical practices, still presume a two person mentor-mentee relationship.[5] Other

books on this topic typically frame the relationship as "mentor-mentee," as Bland does, or define it as Johnson does in his practical 2007 guide: "Good mentoring relationships (mentorships) in academic settings are dynamic, reciprocal, personal relationships in which a more experienced faculty mentor acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced . . . protégé."[6] That is a perfectly valid approach to mentoring in higher education, but it is not ours.

As we convened our FMCs and explored models of mentoring, we were also fortunate to have the personal and intellectual influence of Sharon Daloz Parks, who, along with Arthur Zajonc and Mark Nepo, served as a mentor for the larger project convened by the Fetzer Institute. Parks's essential book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, encourages mentors to go beyond a narrow, operationalized process of instruction and be daring enough to explore and cultivate the deeper aspirations and hopes of the person being mentored.[7] She argued that questions about meaning, purpose, and faith indeed have a place in mentoring and in the work of higher education. She has persuasively argued that as valuable as one-to-one mentoring-protégé relationships can be, the strength of transformative learning that is now needed may require mentoring communities or mentoring environments.

Early on we also read David Bohm's *On Dialogue*, which influenced our understanding of the group process and dynamics of FMCs.[8] Bohm distinguishes dialogue, which has creative and unifying effects, from mere discussion, which tends toward analysis and competition. Typical discussions, according to Bohm, are characterized by a sterile process "batting the ideas back and forth" in an effort to score points and win at a sort of intellectual table tennis game. Dialogue, by contrast, is a cooperative enterprise that facilitates mutual exploration and truth seeking. Bohm's definition of dialogue inspired our thinking about the nature of conversations

within FMCs, as did Peter Block's *Community*, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's *Respect*, and Craig Neal and Patricia Neal's *The Art of Convening*.[9]

As we proceeded into the second and third years of our project, we gradually came to appreciate another important intellectual influence on our work, Aristotle's understanding of friendship (see Books VIII and IX of his *Nichomachean Ethics*). We did not originally set out with the intention of cultivating friendships, either among ourselves or in our FMCs on campus. While we spoke early on of providing space for "collegial" relationships, we did not frame our invitations to participate in FMCs as an occasion to develop friendships. But as we reflected on our experiences with our project, we found our conversations came more and more back to the language of friendship.

All of us were quite comfortable on campus with the imperfect forms of friendship that Aristotle describes: professional relationships that come and go, based primarily on utility or convenience.[10] We have plenty of professional colleagues and acquaintances with whom we can make pleasant conversation at the faculty meeting or partner for a period of time on a joint project. But through our FMCs, we found opportunities for the development of deeper and more lasting friendships—more meaningful relationships where each colleague is now valued as an end in himself or herself. This was, we recalled, precisely what Aristotle characterized as real friendship, and it has become an important outcome of our experiences with FMCs.

Finally, it would be impossible for us, the four authors, to overestimate the influence of our two mentors, Angeles Arrien and Rachel Naomi Remen, on our work with FMCs. Both of these extraordinary women have pioneered work on formation and mentoring in the context of the communities they have founded.

Rachel's Finding Meaning in Medicine groups and Angeles's Four-Fold Way wilderness retreats have affected thousands of participants from around the globe. Their life work has been rooted in wisdom traditions that speak to profoundly human values and aspirations. Angeles and Rachel have been our Socratic midwives, giving birth to our work with FMCs, our writing process, and our collective conversations. Indeed, they have shown to us not just mentorship but friendship.

When we began our work with FMCs, Rachel suggested that our task was to "start a movement"—a notion that we thought was impossibly grandiose until we recalled that she and Angeles had already done just that, transforming medical education and individual lives in this country and beyond. Because of the work they have done, because of who they are, these two women made the incredible sound credible. They gave us courage to do work that we never would have attempted without them.

With their gentle presence and firm commitment, Angeles and Rachel have accompanied us along every step of this journey. Formation mentoring communities not only stand in the lineage of their prior work; they are yet another extension of their work. Angeles's and Rachel's fingerprints are found on every page of this book, and *Transformative Conversations* is as much theirs as it is ours.

INTERLUDE

Message in a Bottle

Perhaps you have found a measure of what we consider success in higher education. You may be regarded as an outstanding teacher, achieved tenure, or garnered some degree of recognition for your work; colleagues may consider you to have made important contributions to your field. But in our experience with peers in the academy, a certain discontent, a vague feeling of dislocation, is found not only among those who are denied tenure or who have not yet been published. It is equally (if not more) distributed among the so-called successful. Those who stand at the top of the tenure ladder may look around and wonder, *Is this as good as it gets? Is this all there is? Is this really why I earned a doctoral degree and joined the academy?* Perhaps beneath the surface of our successes, our accomplishments, our accolades, there remains a dim memory of something else—an inchoate sense of longing for something more.

In his essay "The Message in the Bottle," the late novelist Walker Percy described our predicament in this way.[1] He compared us to a castaway on an island who had lost his memories in a

shipwreck. The castaway soon discovers that the island happens to be a pleasant and fully inhabited place. It has "a remarkable culture with highly developed social institutions, a good university, first-class science, a flourishing industry, and art."

This is a place perhaps not too different from the modern academy. The castaway has no apparent reason to feel alone, for the local islanders receive him warmly and he integrates fully into the community. And yet try as he might, the castaway never feels fully at home. The problem is not with the island, or the people there, or even its institutions, but with the fact that he is a castaway—a wayfarer and a pilgrim. That is his predicament, and he cannot be cured by the island's resources. So he looks to the sea, waiting for something that might speak to his predicament.

The castaway, in his loneliness, often takes walks along the beach, looking out over the sea. From time to time, he comes upon bottles washed on the shore. Each one contains a slip of paper with a sentence written on it. Some bottles contain what he considers "knowledge," and others contain what he calls "news." Bits of knowledge are just that: bare facts, scientific findings that are true but have no direct bearing on his situation (e.g., "Lead melts at 330 degrees"). But bits of news are *news for him* precisely because they speak to his predicament as a castaway (e.g., "There is fresh water in the next cove").

Our castaway in academia is no different: he has a sense that all is not as he would have hoped, and he is bombarded with messages; most are knowledge, few are news. His response to another piece of knowledge is to simply confirm it, reject it, or, most likely, just add it to the many messages piling up in his inbox: "You have been invited to participate in an ad hoc committee on performance improvement according to the latest accreditation standards." Knowledge, not news.

But then he receives the following; "I invite you to participate in a community of respect, regard, acceptance, and trust, in which others want to see and encourage the best in you." This indeed is a piece of news from across the seas. This is a bottle with a message precisely for him.

Let us suppose this castaway accepts the invitation to join a formation mentoring community (FMC). He may discover that "the island" of the university turns out to be populated by other castaways, many more than he could have imagined. The loneliness, one of the core features of his predicament, has already to some extent been relieved, for he is not, as he previously thought, the only one who is looking for something more. There are fellow travelers, wayfarers, pilgrims with whom he can find company, and even friendship. There are other castaways who understand his predicament and can remind him of things he has perhaps forgotten.

There is now a space on the island—a space within the academy—truly different from the others that he had previously inhabited. This community is not a lifeboat that takes him off the island; he may in fact never leave the island. But he can live there feeling less like a lonely exile or a solitary alien. In fact, his contribution to the island culture is enhanced by what he gains from his participation in this community. How do these "castaways" begin to connect with one another in an FMC? In the service of mutual mentoring, FMC conversations often involve personal storytelling. By telling a meaningful story, a person who has entered the group out of a sense of isolation (e.g., "I'm the only person who has had this experience or feels this way") often is able to leave feeling less alone. When we realize that our individual and unique stories—our supposedly isolated and unrepeatable experiences—resonate with others in the group, something surprising happens. Percy writes about this in relation to reading literature, but it holds also for

the experience of telling or hearing stories in the context of an FMC: "That which seems most individual about oneself, the quirky unspoken part of one's experience, even the unspeakable, is suddenly illumined as part of the universal human experience. The exciting paradox of [storytelling] is that it is in one's own unique individuality that one is most human."[2]

So that peculiarly meaningful experience about which we nevertheless had doubts, which puzzled or confused us and caused us to wonder, "Am I crazy for thinking this way? Will anyone have a clue what I'm trying to express?" may turn out to be the very thing that most lights up another member of the group. "Yes! That's how it is! I didn't know anyone had ever felt that way!"[3] Through such connections, the members of an FMC can become a sort of community of castaways.