



At the **TABLE** with Keith Anderson

Learning to Notice: Conversation with a Veteran Mentor

You know, when I first began mentoring, I thought my task was to give advice—to help people make better choices, live more faithfully, grow in wisdom. But over time, I learned that real mentoring is less about telling and more about noticing. It's about paying attention to the quiet, sacred movements that shape a person's life.

Begin with Paying Attention

Jesus said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33), and that has become a touchstone for me. We are, each of us, formed by what we seek — by what we value most. Our role as mentors is to help others see what is shaping them, often without their awareness.

When you meet with someone, start with their image of God. Everyone carries one, whether they realize it or not. I sometimes ask, "What picture of God lives in your heart right now?" or "When you hear the word God, what comes to mind?" Those questions can open deep wells. Many of our early images come from childhood — parents, teachers, pastors, even the tone of a church sanctuary. Over the years, those impressions harden into assumptions. As mentors, we're inviting people to revisit them and ask whether their image of God still holds life and truth.

Listen Without the Urge to Fix

And then, gently, you can help them explore how they see themselves. Every person carries hidden scripts — stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we're worth. Sometimes those scripts sound like "I'm not enough," or "I don't matter," or "I have to earn love." These inner narratives are powerful. Naming them can be painful, but it's often the first step toward freedom.

You might find it helpful to invite your mentee to journal through their stories — not just the moments of harm, but also the moments of redemption. Ask them, "Where have you seen grace show up? When have you experienced God making something whole?" I once heard someone say, "We end up living the gospel we believe." That truth has stayed with me. Listening to someone describe their story of faith reveals the kind of gospel they live by.

At some point, talk about love — not as sentiment, but as allegiance. Ask, "What holds your affection these days? What would you struggle most to surrender if everything else fell away?" It's revealing. What we cling to most tightly often shows us what we worship.

I also ask people to look back over their recent years and notice the voices that have mattered most — those whose presence shaped their faith in the last year, three years, or even seven. And then, with tenderness, invite them to remember the other kind of voices — the ones that wounded or distorted their sense of God or self. The people who betrayed, dismissed, or abandoned them. These, too, are part of their spiritual formation story. Healing often begins by acknowledging who helped and who harmed.

When someone shares a story of heartache or pain, resist the impulse to fix it. Just listen. You might invite them to write that story out, read it aloud to you, and then pay attention together to the questions that rise in the silence afterward. That's where the Spirit often begins to work.

And somewhere in your conversation, ask, "When did you last feel loved, safe, and truly seen?" That question has a way of cutting through all the theology and going straight to the heart.

Walking Together on Holy Ground

Remember, formation is never solitary. The Bible assumes it happens in community. Encourage your mentee to draw a simple map of their spiritual friendships — peers, mentors, elders, family, even those who come to them seeking wisdom. Then ask: "What patterns do you see? Where are you giving and where are you receiving?" Mentoring isn't just about growth; it's about relationship, the mutual shaping that happens when two lives intersect in faith.

And don't forget to talk about practices — the soul exercises that keep the inner life awake. Everyone has their own rhythm: silence, contemplative prayer, journaling, sabbath, acts of justice, confession, reconciliation. These are not duties to perform, but invitations to love. Encourage them to discover which practices draw them closer to God and to others.

Finally, before you meet with anyone, take time to reflect on yourself. Journal on one of these themes. Notice what is stirring in you. Because, in truth, mentoring is never one-directional. The Spirit forms both of you in the process.

That's the quiet beauty of this calling. We walk beside one another — sometimes leading, sometimes following — on holy ground.

Practice:

You might share this with a mentee and use it as a starting point for exploring the purpose, process, and outcomes of mentoring.



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He is the author of several books, including his most recent: On Holy Ground: Your Story of Identity, Belonging and Sacred Purpose (Wipf & Stock, 2024). His other works include Reading Your Life's Story (IVP, 2016), A Spirituality of Listening (IVP, 2016), and Spiritual Mentoring (IVP, 1999). In his writing, teaching, and mentoring, Keith seeks to set a table for people looking to enter the "amazing inner sanctuary of the soul" in the most ordinary and extraordinary moments of life.

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