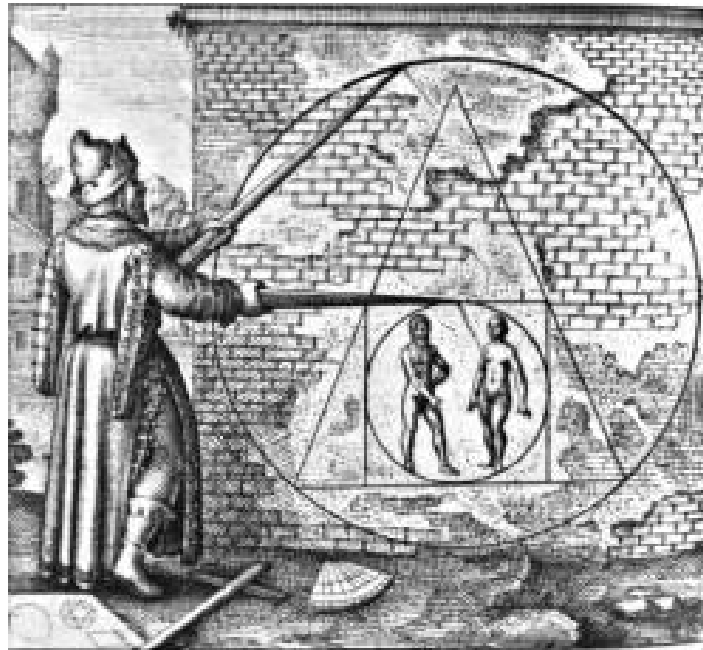


PRAYERS and KNIVES

and other Meditations on the Search for Mentors



Douglas Krisch

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“What is necessary, after all, is only this...
to walk inside yourself and meet no one for hours –
that is what you must be able to attain.”

-Rainer Maria Rilke

“The mind is not a vessel
to be filled, but a fire
to be kindled.”

- Plutarch

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	page 5
The Medicine Woman.....	page 8
The Ghettos Within.....	page 10
Prayers and Knives.....	page 11
The Weather of the Mind.....	page 12
Ode to the Mentors.....	page 14
Our Long Hug	page 17
The Raw.....	page 18
The Tincture	page 20
Conclusion	page 22

Introduction

The great teachers are great mentors.
They hold us, they support us,
they nurture and guide us along the path to self-knowledge.

With all these ‘problems of the self’ dominating our culture, with rampant loneliness and isolation, with millions eating dinner by themselves this evening – why is it that we should seek out solitude? Why is it that we should be seeking paths into our own selves? What is this self-knowledge and why is it essential to our lives?

Creating spaces for self-knowledge is *essential* simply because we need to build some refuges in our lives. We need to find places where we can escape the daily deluge of information, where we can retreat from the daily torrents of advertisements where all types of experts and pretty faces tell us how to eat, how to sleep, how to raise our kids, how to find peace.

With all this supposed guidance, with all this access to information, how is it that we appear to be more lost than ever before?

Over the past eleven years, I have been conducting a long-term research project where I speak to people of all ages about the role of anxiety and depression in their lives – where and when it emerges, how they respond in the short-term and in the long-term, how they distract themselves, how they listen. Well, the initial results are in: the core tenets of our modern culture are not working for many of us.

We have managed to largely neglect our emotional selves. We have failed to validate and respond to our emotional needs and many are struggling - some overtly, others more subtly – because of this neglect.

So how are we to move forward from here?

Conjure up an image in your head for the term, *mentor*. What does a mentor look like to you?

Most people envision a living person, usually a bit older and a bit wiser than themselves. This classical mentor is perhaps the ideal, but we live in times when these types of relationships with wise elders are somewhat hard to find.

There are times when we need mentors, we need guidance, we need wisdom, but the wise elders are not always present in our lives. So we have two choices: to go on without mentors, or to seek them out elsewhere. My search for mentors has been a search for guidance, a search for self-acceptance, a life-long search that continues every month of my life.

But what I have found – and what I am excited to share – is that mentors are not just wise elders; they come in many forms. I have come to define a mentor *as any place or being which provides a nurturing space in which we feel comfortable and courageous enough to listen to that elusive voice within us.*

That voice from within is an emotional voice and a powerful voice. It is, however, a voice much maligned in our culture. And this neglect of our emotional selves has led to a slew of challenges we now must face. But we cannot do it alone. It takes great support to have the strength and the courage to listen to these repressed selves. And this support is precisely the role of mentors, this support is the function of mentors, whether these mentors are people, animals, or rivers.

The journey to know the self, the journey to love the self, is a lifelong journey and one of the greatest of human challenges. Indeed, very few will make it all

the way to the end, where we fully accept whatever life provides for us, where we can lay at peace upon our own death beds.

I am commonly asked, “Isn’t this self-knowledge work selfish?” I respond by encouraging the questioner to become the *experimenter* – to simply try it out. One of the most powerful epiphanies emerges when we realize how often our inner battles are thrown onto others all day long. We begin to see that the path towards self-knowledge eventually leads towards a self-love which in turn moves us towards a profound place of deep empathy for all who cross our paths each day.