

# Models and Mentors

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A PERSON WHO has moved around is more likely to give some thought to the influences which shaped his life and thinking than one who has benefited from the stability and continuity of the same environment. Since my life has been divided among three countries (Hungary, England and the United States) I never took these influences for granted.

I grew up in Budapest and attended high school there; went to college in London and graduate school in this country. My own sense of self has been linked to a considerable degree to these different physical and cultural settings. Nonetheless until now I did little sustained or systematic thinking about the particular individuals encountered in the various settings whose ideas and influences mattered most.

At a time when the concept of "role model" has become common currency (although in a rather oversimplified and debased form) it is especially illuminating to reflect on, or to rediscover, the impact particular individuals have had on our intellectual-spiritual awakening or development, and on the inspiration their ideas and attitudes have provided. To suggest that certain individuals can have such an effect is, however, a far cry from the currently fashionable notion of the "role model" which stipulates that such influence or inspiration can only

come from people with whom we share some obvious demographic trait, such as sex, race or ethnicity. By contrast great teachers, moral exemplars, intellectual heroes, and creative artists make their impact across any demographic or socio-economic chasm that may yawn between them and us, regardless of what they have in common with us as far as such basic and crude measures of commonality, as race or sex are concerned. The impact of exceptional human beings transcends such shared attributes—they have no relevance whatsoever to the influence they exert.

This is not to suggest that only exceptional human beings can make a lasting and important difference to our intellectual-spiritual development. Often people of lesser talent and creativity can also have a far reaching influence especially if they manage to communicate something of importance at a particular point in our lives when we are ready for and receptive to such messages and influences.

It is an intriguing and difficult task to trace the discernible personal influences in our intellectual or spiritual development. All of us engaged with ideas hope to attain some measure of originality; at the same time we know all too well that true originality is extremely rare, that even our deepest feelings and appar-

ently unusual insights have their origins and counterparts elsewhere and have already been felt or expressed in some way by others at other times or perhaps simultaneously.

It is of intrinsic interest to know how ideas and beliefs germinate, what stimulates them, and what combination of influences leads to particular outcomes of intellectual or spiritual orientation, and what kind of people are capable of exerting such influence.

Tracing the influence of particular individuals who played an important part in the life of our mind is also a pleasant undertaking; in doing so we acknowledge more or less obvious ties and obligations to other human beings, dead or alive; we remember people who were generous to us. It is, needless to say, an endeavor which helps us to better understand ourselves—a task we never seem to tire of in our age of acute individualism, eager as we are to plumb the presumed depth of our ego, to come upon new treasures and mysteries.

In the following reflections and recollections I will not be able to single out a particular person, or even a handful of people whose influence was clearly overwhelming or decisive; rather I can give a chronological sketch of a series of influences of different kinds and strength at different points in my life which left a notable imprint.

Perhaps the one common denominator of most of these persons of influence has been that the specific content of their ideas mattered less than their attitude to ideas, to ideals, to learning or understanding human and social affairs. Certain attitudes of seriousness, dedication, and authenticity made a deep impression, and they seemed to weigh more than the particular ideas or ideals advocated or embraced.

Clearly my father was the first source of such influences although he was by no

means a “role model” or “intellectual hero”—his own intellectual-occupational accomplishments were modest and I was fully and somewhat sadly aware of this. He was a largely self-educated man and a mildly frustrated intellectual in the Eastern European mode: a man of many interests and talents but untrained and unfocused. As a young man he did some journalism, was a voracious reader, and could paint and draw; he admired the classics of world literature and music but made his living in ways which had nothing to do with such interests and aspirations (early in his life he worked in a bank, later he was a small businessman, finally a bookkeeper).

What he did impart to me was a belief in the importance of ideas, respect for some sort of artistic-intellectual accomplishment or creativity for its own sake. He wanted me to be a writer, but in a prudent way also wished that I combine such an activity with the practice of medicine, at least to begin with. At one point in time he entertained the fantasy of my becoming a physician on an ocean liner that would also enable me to see the world and meet people—activities beneficial for a writer, he believed. He also wanted me to learn to play a musical instrument, to travel, to attend college in England. He had soothing words about death and the fear of it at a time when it seemed an imminent possibility. In late 1944, when I was twelve, all of us in my family (grandparents included) were in hiding as Jews having refused to go to the Budapest Ghetto; upon arrest such people were immediately shot. I often inquired from my father what it felt like being shot (he had been lightly injured in World War I, a flesh wound in his leg) and he unfailingly assured me that being shot was not particularly painful. After World War II and the passing of the Jewish persecution my apprehensions of death did not cease and he continued to impress on me a stoic vision of departing

from this world.

The presence of many books in our house—classics of Western literature and philosophy, some popular science texts, travel writings, an impressive encyclopedia, mostly acquired by my father as a young man—was in itself important. There were other books of lesser note in the house as well, including best-sellers of the period favored by my mother. In my early teens my father provided me with a generous charge account in an excellent book store in Budapest where I spent a lot of time browsing. Almost the entire store was filled with the masterworks of world literature, arranged by the country of origin, all translated into Hungarian by the best Hungarian writers. I vividly recall one of the owners reading out for my benefit the closing passages of *Madame Bovary*—an activity difficult to imagine taking place in an American bookstore of our times.

My father would also take me to museums and talk to me about selected episodes in world history. He often engaged me in serious conversation about matters historical, political, or philosophical, expounding his views repeatedly with which I usually disagreed in my teens, partly because of their familiarity. We had political disagreements at a time when I was a juvenile leftist (between the ages of 13 and 16) and was unwilling to share my father's scepticism about the durable benefits of radical socio-political change, a scepticism modeled after and reflecting Anatole France's secular humanism and rejection of the French Revolution and his disbelief in the redeeming qualities of any revolution.

I suppose that my father, born in the early 1890s, was still a "product" of nineteenth century secular humanism and rationality; I don't know for example if he ever read Freud, and he certainly never talked about him. He also harbored a serene belief in the accomplishments of science and their beneficial impact on

human lives.

The first person who was an unambiguously positive intellectual influence outside my home was a youthful and enthusiastic teacher, Mr. Vajda, of mostly Hungarian literature in the gymnasium. I do not recall many specifics of what and how he taught, but he loved literature and communicated it. I was a good student in his class (but not in numerous others, especially the sciences); occasionally I visited him in his home where I also met his wife and over cake we continued (I presume) our discussion of some great books.

Next came a tutor who performed the dual task of assisting me in my high school studies of mathematics and attempting to teach me to play the violin. Such home tutoring to help with school work was not unusual in Hungary at the time among families who could afford it; more unusual was the combination of these efforts with the teaching of a musical instrument. He was, I guess, at the time in his early twenties and a medical student at the University of Budapest. He also played in a string quartet (not for public performances) and I often attended those sessions in a private home and became familiar with a large number of Beethoven quartets. He and I often went to concerts together, sometimes my father joined us. His influence on my appreciation of classical music cannot be overestimated. On the other hand I recall that it was with my parents that I had attended the first classical concert of my life around the age 8 or 9 when I became acquainted with Beethoven's Egmont overture, the first piece of classical music I ever heard. My mother, who was an accomplished pianist and graduate of the Budapest Conservatory of Music, also contributed to my exposure to music as she sometimes played the piano at home, mostly Chopin, but also other pieces occasionally. Once in a while she played chamber music as well.

My tutor also talked to me about great books and poems and acquainted me with yoga and bits of oriental philosophy; he introduced me to a resident yogi—a real Indian who published books in Hungarian and learned Hungarian and who subsequently migrated to Switzerland where to this day he runs yoga classes and enjoys considerable popularity. I attended his weekly classes for approximately two years and was at the time greatly impressed by him and yoga. This, however, was an influence that did not endure into adulthood; my interest in yoga and Eastern mysticism waned by my twenties.

My tutor's influence was more durable and diffuse although at the time I felt occasional ambivalence about him on account of his physical aspects: sweaty palms of hands and a generally unkempt appearance—there was a bit too much otherworldliness about him. I could not imagine how he would relate to women (subsequently he married a woman, in what seemed to me a fit of absent-mindedness; she too was somewhat dowdy, physically unattractive, and a bit shrewish). Probably the first genuine intellectual I knew, he was a man totally preoccupied with ideas and indifferent to the world around him, especially its material and political aspects.

Following my teenage years the opportunities for coming into contact with intellectually challenging or inspiring individuals greatly diminished at least temporarily. After completing high school (gymnasium) my family and I were deported (or exiled) by the communist authorities to a village on the Hungarian plain as were other tens of thousands of people from Budapest (to different villages). All of us were defined as politically unreliable, or "class alien" (that is, alien to the working class) or "class enemies." The exile was entirely due to my maternal grandfather's past socio-economic

status: he used to be a prosperous businessman before the War, and my family and I subsequently shared the same apartment with him in Budapest after the War.

In the village where I spent two years I had time to read and I did read a lot; during those years my admiration for Thomas Mann in particular greatly increased; at one point I was thinking of writing him a letter from the village. But I cannot recall what exactly I wished to communicate to him at a period in my life when I felt most discouraged, isolated, and victimized.

With my escape from Hungary following the defeat of the Revolution of 1956 a period of great intellectual awakening and systematic learning began; I discovered (among others) the existence of authors such as Isaiah Berlin, Arthur Koestler, and George Orwell, each of whom became an intellectual hero in a different way. Of the three, Orwell was already dead at the time; with Koestler I exchanged a letter while in London but never met him; Berlin I got to meet decades later. In these instances it was primarily the ideas communicated by the writings, and not the personalities, which sparked my admiration and became a source of enduring inspiration.

The attractions of Koestler and Orwell at first had to do mostly with their thoughtful anti-communism; in their writings I found the most articulate and eloquent critiques of communist systems and ideas I had ever encountered, or ever contemplated. While in the course of my life in Hungary I came to dislike intensely the communist system, this opposition was mostly self-generated, and had no broader intellectual-philosophical underpinnings or expression. Koestler and Orwell allowed me to understand at a deeper level what was wrong with these systems and the tragedy of perverted idealism they represented.

But there was more to the attraction

these writers exercised than being insightful analysts and critics of the evils communist governments embodied. Both of them also struck me as Renaissance Men who not only had inspiring ideas but also led authentic, exciting, risk-taking lives. Perhaps I was especially susceptible to such appeals at the time on account of my age (early and mid-twenties) and because I had just escaped from Hungary in a moderately adventurous way, or because for so long (while in Hungary), I was prevented from leading anything remotely resembling an exciting, and fulfilling life. In the case of Koestler the affinity also had a personal dimension: he too was born in Budapest into a Jewish middle class family and he too early in life was infatuated with communist ideals. To be sure, my own political infatuation with communism was much more shallow, short-lived and inconsequential than his, limited as it was to my early and mid-teens, lasting approximately from 1945 until 1948.

Unlike Koestler's struggle with "the God that failed," ridding myself of these attractions was not a long, wrenching and agonizing process, presumably because my political enlightenment benefited from living under a communist system. I became a sympathizer at the age of 13 primarily because of a gratitude to the Red Army for defeating Nazi Germany and removing, in the process, the threat of being killed as a Jew, rather than as a result of being enthralled by the ideals of Marxism, or indignation about the social injustices of the earlier era. My relatively short and youthful flirtation with communism did not entail a deep attraction to the classics of Marxism or respect for any particular individual personifying the purposes and ideology of the communist system. I do not recall being moved by the turgid writings of the "classics" while I do recall specifically that I disliked, even at an early age, the obscure, ponderous, and intellectually

mendacious writings of my famous fellow countryman, George Lukacs, whom we were obliged to read in the gymnasium as part of our literary studies.

Orwell's writings communicated to me an unusual degree of decency and integrity, besides the specific ideas I endorsed. I admired both his non-fiction and fiction. In subsequent decades I used both Koestler and Orwell in my teaching.

The impact and influence of the writings of Isaiah Berlin is harder to capture. Some of it had to do with his lucid, elegant, and eloquent prose, especially unusual among authors discussing complex social and philosophical issues. A more obvious source of his appeal was the anti-utopian and anti-deterministic message, his amazing access to the history of ideas, his grasp of the price exacted by the pursuit of ideals, of high-mindedness. I also fully agreed with his view that social scientists ought to link socio-political events and processes to "the wishes and purposes of identifiable individuals" rather than to the impersonal forces of history, and that socio-political matters ought to be studied in terms of "the purposes and characters of individuals" involved with them. Perhaps most importantly, I was impressed by his taken-for-granted premise that ideas matter.

Why the belief in the importance of ideas was so important and congenial is an interesting question. To understand it better one must pose the alternative: if ideas did not matter or mattered little (in shaping behavior, social institutions, and political practices), then what did matter, or ought to matter?

It soon emerges that as soon as we abandon the emphasis on ideas as influences over our lives we are led to some deterministic scheme: it then becomes the material or physical environment, or the mode of production, or genes, or some combination of heredity and environment, all of which severely limit our

freedom of action. If we take ideas seriously as sources of our behavior, there is no end to where this may lead—it is a virtually open-ended perspective on human lives, on human destiny. To believe that ideas are powerful is to believe in freedom, in endless possibilities.

In reading Isaiah Berlin I also came to understand, or better appreciate, a key aspect of the human condition, namely that we are consumed by conflicting desires and pursue goals which often cannot be reconciled with one another. To this day this strikes me as the deepest, most change-resistant aspect of human nature, that is to say, the elasticity of human needs and desires and their tendency to come into conflict with one another. It is for this reason that the pursuit of utopia, of some sort of communal harmony is a doomed enterprise, as is the notion of an endlessly perfectible, totally harmonious personal life.

My one meeting with Berlin was arranged through correspondence and took place at the Atheneum Club in London in July 1987. Unfortunately I did not tape our conversation, most of which consisted of his rapid-fire delivery. Happily the personal impression did not undermine or subvert the power of his written words.

The influence of teachers and colleagues at various academic institutions in England and the United States also deserves acknowledgment. Though I did not become a disciple, several of them were memorable. Beginning with the London School of Economics (where I earned my B.A.) I benefited from and was impressed by teachers such as Thomas Bottomore (a revisionist-Marxist sociologist), Hilda Himmelweit (a social psychologist), and Ernest Gellner (an anthropologist-social philosopher), when I was able to grasp what the last was saying. At the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana (where I spent one year, and earned an M.A.) I had excellent

graduate seminars with Bennett Berger and Joseph Gusfield in political sociology. At Princeton (where I got my Ph.D.) the most memorable teacher was Harry Eckstein, the political scientist. At Harvard Alex Inkeles, the sociologist and pioneering researcher of Soviet society—a colleague rather than teacher—was something of an exemplar and inspiration, although his and my approach to sociology were quite different. He embodied confidence in reason and in systematic hard, intellectual work, usually of a quantitative kind.

At Harvard (where I was an assistant professor between 1963 and 1968) I also met and became close friends with Stanley Milgram, the social psychologist best known for his experimental studies of obedience to authority. He was the only person with whom I ever co-authored anything, an article on the Kitty Genovese case in New York in 1964 who was murdered while people listened to her screams and did nothing or next to nothing. Milgram, like Inkeles had a more scientific approach and aspiration toward matters social and psychological than I; he too impressed me with a sharp, penetrating, commonsense, no-nonsense approach to the world of learning and human affairs. There was also an inventive, playful aspect to his work. Like a later exemplar, Sidney Hook, Milgram was also unafraid of controversy and did not endlessly seek to please his colleagues or students as so many academics tend to do.

Finally, among the notable intellectual encounters at Harvard I should also mention Barrington Moore, Jr., the reclusive sociologist-political scientist and author of numerous important studies of Soviet society and Western social-political history. Although he used to be a friend of Herbert Marcuse (whom I held in rather low regard) and was a bitter critic of American society during the 1960s and 1970s, Moore was an indepen-

dent thinker who had no illusions about Marxist systems and movements and entertained a basically pessimistic view of the human condition. He was an academic loner, an elitist in the best sense of the word, in some ways deeply conservative and in these regards somewhat similar to George Kennan, except for his total lack of interest in any public-political role. He too radiated integrity and authenticity, human as well as intellectual.

Outside academia Saul Bellow has been a major influence and inspiration and my favorite contemporary writer. As is often the case with great figures and their influence, it gives me a pause to nail down what precisely was the message he communicated, what profundities he conveyed, what the wisdom I sensed consisted of.

Bellow's writings certainly played an important part in my understanding American society and culture, including the developing counterculture (or adversary culture) of the 1960s. I fully embraced Bellow's attitude toward American culture and society: he was critical of many aspects as was I, yet he was also no friend of the embittered, alienated radical intellectuals who had no use for the freedom and opportunity this society offered and were often irresistibly drawn to highly intolerant and repressive political systems and movements on the left.

Two of Bellow's books in particular made an indelible impression: *Herzog* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, which I also came to use in my sociology of literature course. It so happens that three of my own books (and the three more important ones) begin with a quote from one of Bellow's books.

I suppose what Bellow conveyed to me was similar to what Berlin did at another level and in other ways: the ultimate tragedy of the human condition: the incompatibility and multiplicity of human needs and desires. At the social-

political level this explained the futility of the utopian-revolutionary dreams, at the personal one, the more intimate forms of frustration, restlessness and unhappiness and the endless striving for self-transcendence. I shared Bellow's critiques of modern individualism, as for instance his observation that

this liberation into individuality has not been a great success. For a historian of great interest, but for one aware of the suffering it is appalling. Hearts that get no real wage, souls that find no nourishment. Falsehood unlimited. Desire unlimited.

Sidney Hook was another man whose writings and personality have been influential, if not for my intellectual development (by the time I met him, in the early 1980s, I was as "developed" as I would ever hope to become) but for my attitudes toward present day American society and especially the academic setting and its well established adversary culture.

There have been many people whose world view I shared while I did not warm to them personally; by the same token I had close friends whose politics were different from mine. Sidney Hook I found at once a very likable person and one whose views of the world and American society I almost fully shared (almost, because I have been less of a rationalist, less of a believer in the power of reasoned argument, and more tolerant of psychoanalytic theory).

My acquaintance with Hook began with a correspondence occasioned by the publication of my book *Political Pilgrims* in 1981. He liked the book, encouraged me, and suggested that we get together when he was at his summer place in Wardsboro, Vermont. I eagerly followed up on the invitation and visited him and his wife Ann in their idyllic setting during several summers. Hook impressed me with his simplicity and total unpretentiousness; unlike many well known pub-

lic figures and public intellectuals, there was no hint of self-importance and posturing in his demeanor; he felt no compulsion whatsoever to convey to me how influential and important a figure he was; he had no use for any type of jargon or arcane modes of expression either in conversation or in his writing. There was something immensely appealing in this combination of great intellectual power, integrity, and simplicity. Hook did not try to be popular, well-liked, or agreeable. I often compared him to President Harry Truman.

In our age of gender consciousness some readers may remark upon the fact that not a single woman was mentioned among those who left an imprint on my ideas, intellectual orientation, and development. Truly, I cannot think of a single woman who played an important part in these matters, which of course is not to say that women in general played no important part in my life. Why this has been the case is no great mystery. It is presumably a reflection of the position of women in society while I was growing up and even in my adult life. Aside from Hilda Himmelweit at the London School of Economics, I did not have a single female teacher at any of the institutions I attended.

There have been few female authors, either of fiction or in the social sciences, who dealt with matters of interest to me. In addition, it may also be the case that there was a certain unconscious, traditional compartmentalization of my needs. Women met more the emotional needs, than the intellectual ones. Still, there have been women I admired on mainly intellectual grounds, such as Hilda Himmelweit and more recently Jeane Kirkpatrick, whom I have admired both

on account of her writings and social-political roles and her courage to confront much abuse on college campuses and among academics. More recently I also found much to appreciate in the writings and especially the cultural criticism of Gertrude Himmelfarb.

Is it hard to reach a conclusion about the patterns of these influences or their relative importance. Presumably impressions and influences acquired during one's formative years matter more. Presumably the influence of individuals whose personality I also found appealing was more profound than the impression made by the ideas of someone I otherwise did not care for a lot. Actually, in no single case I can recall, did the ideas of an individual inspire respect while holding his character in low esteem—although this is certainly a theoretical possibility. Great thinkers or artists need not be exemplary human beings. Paul Johnson devoted a book to famous and influential Western intellectuals and writers of fiction who were less than admirable human beings, who cared a lot about mankind but little about people around them, including those with whom they were most intimately associated.

Even more difficult it is to assess the influence on one's world view and spiritual development of events and experiences which were unconnected to particular individuals and their ideas. What mattered more, then, certain people, their books, lectures, and personal communications, or other experiences including those without any manifest intellectual content or message? It is far from clear.

In the final analysis, we can only guess and speculate about the question of who we are and how we became what we are.