Problem Children
Mentor training booklet

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prepared for

What we mean by "mentorship"

THE DILEMMA OF LANGUAGE

As it relates to Problem Children, the word "mentor" has long felt incorrect. The connotations and experiences people have with the idea of a "mentor" are manifold and often lead away from how we mean it. Beginning by unpacking this shorthand term to give you a clearer view of what we mean, is important.

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Problem Children did not begin as a philosophical or creative-thinking exercise, yet it is informed (literally and via osmosis) by a myriad of educational philosophies, experiments, and approaches that have been developed over the past century(-ish).

Writers and thinkers like Paulo Freire, Heather Malin, John Paul Gatto, and Erich Fromm supply some of the language that helps us understand the approaches and contexts we are working in. Educational experiments like Black Mountain College, CalArts, Waldorf, and the Bauhaus give us examples of how we might structure relationships and physical spaces to help us achieve our goals.

This list is by no means exhaustive. It is provided to give a glimpse into the ways we think about how Problem Children should (and does) operate. It is a reminder that we have a collective lineage in this space, that there are ancestors and histories we can learn from. And, as mentioned before, these external reference points give us some of the language needed to communicate with each other - and the world - about what we are trying to do.

While we are informed by many great thinkers and practitioners, Problem Children has been designed to keep everyone (including mentors and staff) in the learning space. That is, responding rather than reacting or blindly applying philosophies or pedagogies.

This gets at the heart of what it means to be a Problem Children mentor.

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At the very core of Problem Children is the notion that love is a faculty, not a relationship. It is the idea that love is "*... an attitude, an orientation of character which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not toward one 'object' of love*" [01] . From this understanding, we can better think about why Problem Children exists at all, and the role that mentors play (and what they might gain) in this wonderful and unfolding experiment.

Without a sense of love for others, Problem Children would not exist. The program stemmed from a desire to provide the next generation the tools, resources, and community we wish had existed when we were their age. The love, care, respect, camaraderie, and encouragement to move past self-doubt and fear. The perspective to begin thinking in longer timeframes, to respect the process of growth. Problem Children stemmed from an urge to lovingly provide these things, to create a context and set of relationships that is missing in the world.

This sense of love might not be top of mind for you, but it is likely that upon reflection you will find that you too love others and that this is at the heart of your motivation to give up your weekends for a summer to be a mentor to a bunch of kids you don't yet know. I invite you to take stronger ownership of that motivation. To flex your capacity for love and regard it as a skill, a faculty, a muscle that Problem Children is encouraging you to strengthen.

Starting from love we can make better decisions in the roles we play, how we set healthy boundaries, and how we challenge, encourage, and witness the growth of students.

If we see ourselves as invested in students, we can more accurately consider how to handle the challenges of motivating and daring students to go beyond their comfort zones. When we are witnesses to how students think, create, and engage, we can reflect this back to them in ways that help them see themselves as more than they currently are—as humans who are *becoming*.

Love is at the root of both of these ideas.

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01 *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm, 43

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Another way to think about love is through one of its primary components: respect. In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm says, *"... the root of the word (respicere = to look at)... Respect means the concern that the other person should grow and unfold as (she) is."* [02]

In this way, the idea of respect is central to how mentorship functions in Problem Children. We are guides who invite students to blossom in accordance with their own essence. This approach also helps us remember the reality of the situation we find ourselves in.

We do not "give" students agency—we provide a place for them to develop their unique version of it. We do not "teach" students how to be creative—we prompt them to exercise their capacity for imagination. We do not give students "answers"—we reveal tactics that will help them find their own truths.

Another way to think about this is in the way that Black Mountain College founder John A. Rice described the pedagogical efforts and approach taken at the college:

> *Our central consistent effort is to teach method, not content; to emphasize process, to invite the student to the realization that the way of handling facts and himself amid the facts is more important than the facts themselves.* [03]

This approach is the reason we challenge students to devise their own projects. We are asking them to create their own set of facts and then learn how to handle them. By inviting them to explore this capacity in a discrete creative project, we shine a light on how they can apply this to other areas of their lives.

To put it bluntly: we aim not to teach students what to think, but to "practice the tools through which they become independent thinkers" [04] .

To do this effectively we, as mentors and staff, must remain with students in the learning experience. As more experienced individuals, we might have good ideas of where to begin looking for things, but we must always be seeking to learn *with* and *from* students. We may point students in directions, but then we must journey with them into the unknown, allowing them to guide the learning, exploration, and generation of new knowledge.

02 *The Art of Loving*, Fromm, 26

03 Black Mountain College prospectus, 1952, John A. Rice

04 *How Art Can Be Thought*, Allan deSouza, 70

In this way we embody the idea of co-learning that Paulo Freire speaks of in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* when he says: "*The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.*" [05] It is our role to learn with students so that we may expand our own understanding of the world, and model the approach of being life-long learners. This approach means that we are helping students step into new areas of knowledge, to generate new understandings of the world. It means that we are *leading* students to new knowledge, not *giving* it to them.

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We are not in the business of instilling information in the minds of students, but rather we must approach working with them in the way that Fromm describes motherly love: *"The very essence of motherly love is to care for the child's growth, and that means to want the child's separation from herself".* [06]

This framing is central to how we should think of our place as mentors in Problem Children. We must strive to provide students the opportunity to step beyond what we ourselves see as possible, correct, or feasible. To ensure that they remain separate from ourselves so that they can remain true to their own self development. We must not put students in the position of trying to gain validation from our approval, but rather to be in unknown territory where they are required to develop the criteria by which they will judge their own work (and lives).

In *How Art Can Be Thought*, Allan deSouza quotes from Deborah Solomon's criticism of art school.

> *"In the visual arts, at least, the MFA boom has not been accompanied by a growth in the amount of first-rate art being created in this country. In fact many critics feel that art schools are directly responsible for a decline in the quality of art. 'When I go to the New York galleries, all I see is art-school art' says Barbara Rose, the art historian. 'The art is either feminist or deconstructionist, and basically it looks like homework, because what is homework but learning how to follow the teacher's rules?"* [07]

To avoid this "homework" trap, we must act as coaches and instructors who instill in students a sense of courage, tenacity, and faith in their own creative minds and abilities to judge the work they are creating. This process gives

05 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire

06 *The Art of Loving*, Fromm, 48

07 *How Art Can Be Thought*, deSouza page 36

students the capacity to create things that go beyond what we could have imagined.

This means that we focus on process, learning tools, and developing critical thinking. This creates a space that allows students to reach levels of observation, understanding, and creative output that exceed what they believed they were capable of. It gives students the space to inhabit the freedom that is afforded to all humans. It is "the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination".

Furthermore, we must remain rooted in the fact that all of us - students, mentors, staff - are learning about the world as we explore it. That we *all* are becoming. That, most likely, we are wrong about the way we think "things should be". If we remember this, we can be more truthful about the role we play in the lives of students.

Which is to say that we are "the old" showing "the new" the world as it *is*, and extending an invitation for them to help make the world that *could* be. We are helping them take ownership over their place in the world. They are the ones who can move society into previously unknown (and unknowable) territory. In doing this, we honor students for the valuable and important roles they play in society, and in the human species.

...

The points we've begun to explore here are central to the role of mentorship - and we will dig into them further in the following pages - but there is one last point that is critical to the position of a mentor in Problem Children: mentors are individuals as much as they are a unit. The ways in which we interact and engage with each other and with students is critical to the healthy functioning of Problem Children.

Being a Problem Children mentor is an invitation into a collective of people who are striving to find the right tools, contexts, and interactions to empower future generations as they work to move humanity forward. This means that we are not just teaching *these* students *this* summer, we are building knowledge within our community across time. The hypothesis is that this knowledge will help us reach new ways to understand, envision, and provide education.

To paraphrase deSouza: how might we as mentors imagine ourselves as an artist collective, with the institution (contexts) and pedagogy (teaching) as our social practice project? How can we work together in our role as a cohesive unit teaching our crafts (problem solving, relationship building, creative/critical thinking, life-long learning)? And how do we, as individuals, remember that

teaching is a gift we give, and receive?

Even if you spend only one summer as a mentor for Problem Children, your presence will make a difference in how this experiment unfolds. You play a critical role in helping us generate the knowledge, expertise, and practices that we can refine and implement as we teach Problem Children.

By recognizing your role as an active participant and as an individual with a unique role on our team, we hope that you feel empowered to help constructively shape Problem Children: the curriculum, the approaches, and each other.

...

The future of Problem Children is (like all things) unknown.

By giving you more language, references, and a deeper understanding of the thinking that informs our beliefs, values, and practices, you can better inhabit them. Hopefully this instills some confidence that you can handle new facts by calling upon the faculties and ways of being we have just illuminated.

In this way you become a more empowered part of our community, and are enabled to help move Problem Children into territories that are unknown (and unknowable).

Three of a kind

Now that we have established a sort of foundation for the motivations and approaches we should take as mentors, we can organize them into an actionable framework. The way we have done this is through the notion that there are three spheres of motivation which are embodied by an action which leads to a pair of named behaviors. More plainly: there is a *source* that is expressed through a *tactic* which is embodied in *roles*.

The three spheres are:

1. Love through Witnessing is embodied by the Investor and the Journalist
2. Curiosity through Conversing is embodied by the Guide and the Reference Librarian
3. Encouragement through Training is embodied by the Coach and the Driving Instructor

This, again, is not an exhaustive list. Rather, these ideas serve to help ground your understanding of the role of a mentor. These sources, tactics, and roles should help you better navigate the different positions you need to take with students - and define your own that are aligned with these perspectives. They also give us language to lean on when consulting each other about the joys, difficulties, and opportunities that will arise in our work.

They are a reminder that the mentor role is multifaceted, stretching beyond the simplicity of a single word. Being a mentor means you will need to inhabit these roles in varying degrees and at varying times, relying on your own judgement and understanding to give students the care, resources, and encouragement needed to thrive.

LOVE THROUGH WITNESSING

> *"... the ultimate touchstone of friendship is not improvement, neither of the other nor of the self, the ultimate touchstone is witness, the privilege of having been seen by someone and the equal privilege of being granted sight of the essence of another, to have walked with them and to have believed in them, and sometimes just to have accompanied them for however brief a span, on a journey impossible to accomplish alone."*
>
> *— David Whyte*

The foundational stance that informs every aspect of being a mentor is that of being a loving witness. We can think of this as being an Investor and a Journalist. The investor provides energy (love) and resources to help another grow in accordance with their essence. The journalist notices (witnesses), makes connections, and reflects truth back to the observed.

When we are invested in something we can say that we are interested in that thing. We can take this further by semantically linking the notion that being *interested* in something is equivalent to *loving* it. As Alain de Botton frames it: *"To love someone is to take a deep interest in them and hence by that concern, to bring them to a sense of what they are doing and saying"* [01] . In our parlance, this framing helps us link the dualities of the journalist and the investor.

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Society's general stance towards teenagers is to turn a blind eye to them. The negative implications of this are widespread and go beyond the bounds of what we will touch on here. But suffice to say that we do not create spaces that allow young creative minds to take part in the world. We do not witness them. This blindness denies them an important way to create a meaningful identity in the world. It impoverishes us culturally, morally, and creatively.

Mentors should understand that witnessing plays a critical role in helping students create their own sense of self. That it helps them know themselves, and gives them a meaningful tool towards the development of a self-actualized identity. *"I need another to help me carry my history, one who knows me as well, sometimes better, than I know myself"* [02]

01 *On Love*, Alain de Botton, 129

02 ibid, 128

This witnessing places an emphasis on reflecting back what we are seeing. When we honestly and generously reflect back a students passions, talents, and capacities, we help them see themselves as an expansive (and expanding) spirit. We show them where they have come from, what they are focusing on, and what they are becoming.

This understanding of being a witness lies at the heart of what we mean by the term "journalist". The journalist pays close attention to the goings-on of another, makes connections to other areas of the world, and reflects the state of things back to the observed. By playing this role for students, we lovingly help usher them into the realm of "adulthood"—that is the mindset that one has a vital role to play in the development of ones self, and the development of the society one is a part of.

This role is about helping students step into the world in a way that is true to their own nature, to their essence as human spirits. It is important, therefore, that we continually strive to reflect a students unique light back to them. That we inspire and witness them in positive and affirming ways. In ways that center growth, exploration, and courage. In ways that help them see how they can contribute to the positive growth of their interior lives and the spiritual health of their communities. This touches on the responsibility of being a positive force in the world and gets at the overlap of the Journalist and the Investor.

One way to define "invest" comes from the Latin root of the word "*investire*", which can mean *"to formally give power or authority to someone".* What is the power or authority we are giving to students? It is the power and authority over their own lives. It is the realization that this power is their divine right, we simply make space for them to explore it. The point is to bring them into the responsibility that their life is theirs to define, to have power over, to exercise authority over how they move through (and into) society. It is impossible to do this with integrity when we do not understand ourselves. This is why witnessing plays such a foundational role in our interactions with students.

This brings us back to the idea that we, as mentors, must help students realize and develop in accordance with their own essence and nature. It also points us toward the active behavior represented by the investor. The investor is not someone who blindly throws resources at an idea, person, or product. The investor strategically provides resources, knowledge, and advice to allow internal flourishing and self development.

This approach helps us better understand how we should interact with students. Mentors (as investors) do not act as benevolent dictators over the thoughts, actions, and growth of students. We are responsive to their self-expressed curiosities, needs, and goals and do our best to usher them towards self-identified

and self-actualized progress. As investors, we give students the tools to move forward in their own directions.

Our role is not to judge their direction (for even we do not know all the ways in which a life can, or should, be lived) but to help them maintain a focus on growth, experimentation, and to develop comfort with the unknown. To help them develop courage. To say to students, through our actions, encouragements, and actual language: *"I trust that you have integrity and that you are capable of great things - use this to build trust within yourself."*

The duality of the Journalist and the Investor speaks to how we should help students better understand themselves and how we can provide the tools, support, and community to help them define and live a life of purpose.

CURIOSITY THROUGH CONVERSING

> *The learner must be led always from familiar objects toward the unfamiliar, guided along, as it were, a chain of flowers into the mysteries of life.*
>
> *— Charles Willson Peale*

Thinking about love as a faculty, we can say that one of it's most powerful drivers is a sense of curiosity. This is manifested in conversations, questioning, and actively seeking to understand the other. We can see these motivations embedded in the roles of the Guide and the Reference Librarian.

A guide asks where you want to go, and then helps you navigate terrain unfamiliar to you, pointing out the sign posts and trails that others have blazed. The reference librarian provides you sources and information to connect ideas in novel ways as you seek to create new knowledge. Both of these roles are about seeking to understand students (curiosity), and to use this knowledge to bring new ideas to their awareness (conversation).

As the quote above by Charles Wilson Peale illuminates, the roles we're defining here are about helping students move from that which is known towards that which is unknown. By helping students acknowledge where they have come from and understand where they are now, we can help them more clearly define the unlit terrain they are heading towards.

In this way we give students the power to choose the lives they lead - to pick up the tools of self-actualization and get to work. We help them understand the universal truth that David Whyte points to when he says: *"The defining*

experience at the diamond-hard center of reality is the eternal movement as beautiful and fearful invitation; a beckoning dynamic asking us to move from this *to* that". [03]

...

One of the failures of modern education that Problem Children seeks to address is a disconnection from the past that students feel - even as they cannot (yet) name it. Modern pre-college curriculum offers little in the way of connecting the past to where you, as an individual, are today. I am, of course, speaking in generalities, but this idea is so embedded in the critique directed at schooling that it may as well be a contemporary universal truth.

This failure leads us (as John Taylor Gatto puts it) to: "*continue to grow crops of children who have trouble connecting the present to the future and trouble connecting the past to the present*" [04] . It means that students have trouble moving from the known (present) into the unknown (future) precisely because they do not truly understand what has come before (past). This points to the distinction between *information* and *knowledge* which we will explore later on. But to remain on this point, we return again to Gatto: "*The notion that every problem can be studied with an empty mind, without preconception, without knowing what has already been learned about it must condemn children to chronic childishness.*"

This failure leads us, also, into an understanding of the importance of the guide and the reference librarian. To think about it in visual terms, we can see these roles as helping students create a map.

Being a guide means that you bring curiosity to what a student is interested in, that you seek to understand (through conversation) what drives their need to create. From this understanding you can guide students toward a comprehension of what has already been learned. A good guide helps students gain a clearer view of their own curiosities through awareness of the history of that space. By understanding the lineage of their curiosities, drives, and passions, you guide them through what is known and knowable.

You guide them through "familiar objects". To help them move "toward the unfamiliar" we must step into the role of the reference librarian.

This means we provide students with references, ideas, and approaches that provoke their curiosity and encourage their ability to connect ideas - to create knowledge - through the process of bringing new ideas to their map. It is a way to bring light into parts of their map that are unlit.

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03 *Consolations*, David Whyte, 166

04 *The Curriculum of Necessity or What Must an Educated Person Know?* John Taylor Gatto

By helping students understand the histories, lineages, and trajectories they sit at the edge of, we give them the language needed to wrangle their amorphous curiosities and passions. From this understanding, we challenge students to link new ideas, to form their own connections, and to bring their unique perspectives, personal histories, and talents to bear on creating new (personal) knowledge. In helping students connect the past to the present, we help them gain clarity on how the present is connected to the future.

This understanding (preconception) is the missing link Gatto speaks of and that deSouza points to as necessary for a truly informed, sophisticated, and engaged art practice:

> *We cannot function without preconceptions, since preconceptions are the prior knowledge and imagination that enable us to situate ourselves in/with the world and in time, and that provide the ground from which we can make sense of any new encounter. Making and experiencing art are fully dependent on abilities to conceptualize based on prior knowledge and experience. An "open mind" is a vacant mind, uninformed by history, even by that of its own memory, and is therefore a mind that spirals out of time. Destabilization and momentarily snatching us out of linear time are some of art's most provocative potentials—and ones I do not discount. But such potential, even to discuss if and how it can happen, requires an engaged mind, and an appropriately expansive and critical set of tools, including that of language.* [05]

At the core of the guide and the reference librarian is a desire to provide students with language, information, and understanding that they can use to engage with the world. It's about equipping students with the ability to see how the past connects to their present, and to link new ideas to this history to boldly venture into uncharted territories.

This helps students to position themselves within the ongoing conversation that is humanity and to begin carving out their unique place within it.

05 *How Art Can Be Thought*, de Souza, 81-82

ENCOURAGEMENT THROUGH TRAINING

> *We have faith in the potentialities of others, of ourselves, and of mankind, because and only to the degree to which, we have experienced the growth of our potentialities*
>
> *— Erich Fromm*

The third and final component in our approach to mentorship lies in the definition of encouragement: *give support, confidence, or hope*. It is the act of fanning the flames of courage through training. We can see this as playing the role of the Coach and the Driving Instructor.

Both roles provide training, instill confidence, and facilitate growth of self-knowledge. The coach does this through vocal and active uplifting (encouragement), daring the learner to go beyond their current limitations. The driving instructor helps understand the rules of the road (training) so that the learner can navigate new and unknown obstacles and situations. And both roles have an aim of embedding this knowledge in the learner.

When thinking of ourselves as providing encouragement through training, we acknowledge the reality that true mentorship places an emphasis on the student going beyond what the mentor knows. The coach may not know how to technically/physically/creatively do what they are coaching, but they know the techniques and practices that facilitate excellence. The driving instructor can not know everywhere the student will go, but they impart the skills needed to safely move through the world.

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Let us return to the quote from John A. Rice, which provides a concise and clear view of what we mean when talking about the role of training and encouragement:

> *Our central consistent effort is to teach method, not content; to emphasize process, to invite the student to the realization that the way of handling facts and himself amid the facts is more important than the facts themselves.*

As this quote illuminates, our role as mentors is to teach students *how* to make, not *what* to make. By staying focused on this (method) we can better help them grow and develop in accordance to their essence.

Undoubtedly you realize that this point has been made multiple times—this is intentional.

Positioning ourselves towards students in this way is crucial to developing proper boundaries (we are not gatekeepers) and gives students confidence in the right way: through their own effort, not the validation of a "superior".

This means that when working with students, we should elevate their capabilities, effort, and thoroughness - not simply the *content* that is a result of their capabilities and efforts. We acknowledge that students are talented, but that to honor their talent requires us to apply pressure - thoughtfully, of course - that challenges them to step outside their comfort zones.

Much like an expert coach, we provide the physical understandings that must be paired with talent to achieve greatness. While we do not know how a technique will embed itself in the learner, we can guide them along by providing encouragement, nuanced advice, and feedback on ability and finesse.

The "physical understandings" we speak of here are not necessarily technical skills (how to paint, take a good photograph, etc...) but rather the skills of communication, inquiry, problem-solving, and the like. While it is tempting to say that these are mental faculties, we must remember that for each of us, these faculties are embodied - that is, they reside within our bodies.

Think of your own experience as a driver. As we see with self-driving cars, the act of driving can be broken down along logical and mathematical understandings. *"If I am X feet from the car ahead of me, moving at Y speed, I should start braking at Z distance so I do not crash"*. In this way we can say that driving is a mental faculty—but the best drivers have the knowledge embodied in their physical (tactile) understanding of driving. Even not-so-great drivers use physical understanding rather than logical calculations.

This physical understanding is deeply tied to the idea of courage. Having courage means to boldly face the unknown, to trust in your own capacities and do what is necessary–not when it is easy, but when it is hard. When the facts are unknown, when the terrain is unfamiliar. It takes courage to physically act in response to something unknown, to beat some secret resistance, to turn and face the darkness ahead of you. This is the knowledge that the driving instructor instills in a student.

As a driving instructor it is impossible to teach someone how to navigate every type of terrain and circumstance. The only hope is to give someone such a deep physical understanding of *how* to drive that they are capable to move with ease, poise, and confidence (courage).

Having a physical understanding of how to confront the unknown means you are able to calmly approach the darkness and not lose your capabilities when things go awry. A physical understanding means that when you are on slippery roads and lose your grounding, you will turn into the skid, rather than against it (pardon the over extended metaphor).

This physical understanding leads us back to the quote from Rice. As coaches and driving instructors we are here to instill an understanding of method, not of specific facts and specific logical calculations. This also means that we must encourage students with humility—for we do not know the full extent of what they are learning. We must act as benevolent coaches and calm instructors, providing clear and non-reactionary feedback as students learn.

Here we return to the idea of co-learning. If we enact these roles in firm but gentle ways, we open the student up to deeper learning and we can learn from them in return. By being resolute and flexible, we put ourselves in the position of responding to how students are developing and better understand how we can play into their innate strengths and modes of learning.

In this way the role of the coach and the driving instructor are again about conversation, about understanding, about love. They put you in direct conversation with students as you seek to help them connect their inner worlds to their outer worlds, to grow from the inside out. To blossom from their essence.

By training students in methods, we help students develop a physical comfort with the unknown, and ultimately help them navigate the "creative frontier" which "is by its nature a conversational frontier, it is a meeting of the inner and the outer worlds we inhabit." [06] If we have the courage to engage this conversation we can develop it and knit our inner and outer worlds together. This is how we grow and how we find, in the world, a place we can call our own.

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The sources, tactics, and roles we have just touched on all point in the same direction: an understanding that *"love is primarily giving, not receiving"*.

This lies at the heart of what we, as mentors, can gain: a sense of our own capacity, expansion, and place in our human experiment. As Erich Fromm says: *"In the very act of giving, I experience my strength, my wealth, my power"*. By remembering this we remain motivated as we work with students.

06 This version of a common idea is borrowed from David Whyte, again from *Consolations*

This approach helps us realize that our behavior in the presence of students, and how we treat them, shapes our experience of Problem Children. If we commit to creating a space of love (in all its softness and harshness) we can all experience the breadth of our power, of our divine wealth.

This points to a final, inescapable, and deeply important part of being a mentor: the realization that you are now a role model.

The Role Model

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD EXAMPLES

> *There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned.*
>
> *—Simone Weil*

Until now we have spoken directly about the way Problem Children asks you to be, the actions that are appropriate, and the stances you are called to take. But there is one final thing to understand: as a Problem Children mentor, you will be seen as a role model.

For all the work we do to flatten the hierarchy of Problem Children, the younger folks will always look to the older folks for clues on what it means to be a person – across every dimension of personhood. By choosing to be a Problem Children mentor, it is now your responsibility to be a good example in all aspects.

This presents the greatest opportunity for you as a mentor. It is a chance to take up behaviors that are good and true, that you want more of in your own life, and that you want these younger folks to see in the world. In every interaction you have with the students (during the program and beyond) you have the chance to be the best version of yourself, to give yourself and others the grace that can be hard to summon in our usual day-to-day lives.

By holding yourself as a role model you can positively shape how these young people see, navigate through, and understand the world. This is an awesome responsibility and a magnificent gift.

A RESONANT SMILE

Think of how you might smile at a young child on the bus. This is most often a reflexive response to a small creature that is adorable and bursting with glee. But, on a deeper level, you are also transmitting a cross-generational signal. As a non-familial or authoritative figure in this child's life, your smile tells this new human that the world is friendly and they are welcome here.

In doing so, you perform a human service that heightens their belief in the positivity of the world. It is a space where you establish a relationship with a child where you both feel a sense of connection and exchange. You both are affected and create a response in each other. Through this you both are changed. This is an example of *resonance*.

To the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, *resonance* is our ability to be touched (affected), to touch (self-efficacy), and to be changed (adaptive transformation) through this exchange. When you graciously interact with young children in the way described above, you activate their (and your) sense of resonance. You say to them: *you can be touched by the world, you can touch it, and everything will be changed because of this interaction.*

Tragically, as children get older we stop reflexively smiling at them. Our exchanges lose resonance and start to encourage a view of the world as a place of scarcity. As a thing that needs to be controlled and managed. We codify boundaries and tell them that they must prioritize outcomes over process—returns on investment, not the mysteries of discovery. Through this shift we communicate to youth that the world is made of sharp edges, frictions to overcome, cliffs to be wary of.

Thoughtful advice, healthy cynicism, and careful preparation are important—the world is indeed full of sharp edges, treachery, and exploitation. However, with *just* these, our experience of the world becomes full of disconnection, fear, and smallness. Further, one's opinion on the Truth of the world is a matter of perspective. That is to say that the ways in which we relate to each other, to objects, and to the world is *changeable*. Nothing about our experience or the modern condition is predestined. It has all been crafted. Whether through grand plots or small stupid acts makes no difference, what is clear is that the way the world *is* is not how the world *must* be.

When we behave toward each other in ways we wish were more prevalent in the world, we make them so—we construct the world by acting in it. Through our behaviors we can show the next generation a world that is open and hospitable, malleable and reachable. This is the power to shape not only the way this future generation experiences the world, but profoundly affects the way we live ours.

Problem Children is a place for those behaviors. It is a space, context, and set of relationships where we show the next generation a different view of the world: one full of abundance, hope, and good will if they look for it. It is a space where resonance and exchange are valued. It is a call to amplify the softness and welcoming aspects of the world. By doing this we create an example for students of mature hopefulness and good relationships.

THE TRAITS OF RESONANCE

Before we go on, let us quickly return to *resonance*. While the word has many definitions and each of us our own experiences of it, looking at how Rosa defines resonance can transform it into a tool that moves us toward connection.

We have already touched on them briefly, but, to Rosa, resonance is made up of four key traits:

1. *Being affected*: to feel that something is touching you, calling out to you, that you are being "addressed".
2. *Self-efficacy*: our own response to being affected – the notion that when we are affected we have the capacity and ability to respond. It is our ability to have *emotions*.
3. *Adaptive transformation*: the idea that we are transformed by the thing that has affected us and that we have responded to. We can never know what its effect will be, and that it works in both ways: I am changed and the person/place/thing affecting me is changed (even if only in my own mind/ experience).
4. *Uncontrollability*: in the end, resonance is not controllable. We cannot engineer it nor can we resist it. Resonance will often surprise us, and it is this uncontrollability that makes resonance so powerful.

To Rosa, resonance is scarce in modern society. He looks at our epoch as a time where we have sought to control everything and have found ourselves living in a world that rarely resonates with (speaks to) us. The depths of his argument are profound, but, put succinctly, Rosa believes we are losing an important trait of *human nature*: the ability to touch each other and the world around us.

In creating a world that does not resonate, we are creating a world that is dead to us, and us to it. A world where we are numb and ineffective, despairing and disenchanted.

By outlining these traits, Rosa opens our eyes to moments of resonance and to an understanding of how it works. He points us toward the essential elements

that create the feeling of being *a part of* and *in touch with* the world. In the end, his analysis is a reminder of what is available to us and that our feelings of disconnection are not predestined, that the world is not immutable. Nor are we.

Recognizing that the world is mutable helps us overcome his fourth point about the uncontrollability of resonance: that we cannot engineer it. While uncontrollability presents an obstacle toward using resonance as a tool, we make use of resonance simply through our recognition that it is a experience to be had, that it is something we can open ourselves to. It is a reminder that through small actions (the call and response of traits one and two) we can amplify the likelihood of resonant moments.

When we engage with each other through a framework that seeks to heighten resonance, we transmit to younger people the *human* traits that make the world a hospitable place. Through these actions, we model what it means to be a mature, connected, and caring person. By doing so, we work against the cultural death that Eric Fromm warned about in 1941, when he wrote:

> *If we should not succeed in keeping alive a vision of mature life, then indeed we are confronted with the probability that our whole cultural tradition will break down. This tradition is not primarily based on the transmission of certain kinds of knowledge, but of certain kinds of human traits.*
>
> *If the coming generations will not see these traits any more, a five-thousand-year-old culture will break down, even if its knowledge is transmitted and further developed.* [01]

01 *The Art of Loving*, Fromm 108—109

ROOTEDNESS

> *Persons of character are not public products.*
> *They are made by local cultures, local responsibilities.*
>
> *—Wendell Berry*

"The Starfish Story" tells of a child walking along a beach after a storm has washed up thousands of starfish. As the child walks, she stops to throw starfish back into the water - one at a time. After a while, an adult comes by and questions the child's actions. *"Why are you doing this? You cannot save them all, you cannot make a real difference."* The child bends down, picks up another starfish, throws it back into the ocean, and replies, *"I made a difference to that one"*.

This story, one of numerous variations on *The Star Thrower* by Loren Eiesely, reminds us that we must not be discouraged from helping (saving) others simply because we cannot help (save) the entire world. It is a call to do the work we can here, now. It also illuminates the reality that helping even one person is a worthy effort because it is a way to give the respect that each human being deserves.

The Starfish Story awakens us to the reality that we must start where we are, that we have a responsibility to those closest to us—to our locality. Thus we are called to help ensure the survival of its humanity through tending to our local culture, and not just to preserve its knowledge. Responding to this call we acknowledge the ties that ground us in a place and bind us as humans across generations.

Acting on your local responsibility gives you roots. Subsequently, being rooted compels you toward ensuring the health and vitality of where you are, to make of it a home. To make a home is to create a place that is welcoming for those who find themselves there—a place where everyone, but especially the next generation, feels they have control, influence, and space to reach their full potential, to the benefit of all. Making this space is a way to fulfill the need Simone Weil identifies in *The Need for Roots* when, speaking about education and youth, she says *"They must be made to feel at home, too, in the world of thought."*

Home is more than a place where we feel as if we can be ourselves, it is a place that *needs* us. This need is placed upon who we are *and* who we are becoming. That is to say: home is a place that needs us to grow. Answering this call is one of the hardest things we humans must do.

Because growth is often an unpleasant experience, it can be easy to avoid encouraging, daring, or pushing others toward it. But challenging others toward

growth is a fundamental way we show respect to those around us. By believing that someone has yet to reach their full potential, we acknowledge their humanness and point them towards opportunities to find their roots, to change themselves and the world - to resonate.

Returning to Rosa: "*We cannot resonate with someone who* always *tells us we are right, who* always *encourages or shares our opinions and fulfills our every desire*" [02] . Challenging another is, at the core, a belief in them. It is a sign of respect that honors their personhood as they are and helps them move toward a sense of rootedness in the world. Going beyond the personal, this approach honors the particular treasures of the past and holds up "certain particular expectations for the future". This maintains, supports, and grows the chain between the past, the present, and the future that is the basis of human culture.

...

In *Ripples From The Zambezi*, Ernesto Sirolli professes his faith in human potential, in *"[our] universal characteristics of wanting to become something, of enjoying good work, of achieving respect, and self-respect, by performing beautifully*".

In the end, being a Problem Children mentor requires this same faith.

02 *The Uncontrollability of the World*, Hartmut Rosa

A very personal definition

Until now, we have been speaking about how *we* at Problem Children define and understand the work we are doing with students. This helps us communicate with common language, creates shared goals, and clarifies the stances we must take. To go a step further, it is important that you – as a mentor – approach this program with an understanding of the perspectives, goals, and values you hold.

Whether through conversation with a Problem Children staff member, or on your own, you have most likely already engaged in some level of personal reflection about your decision to join the program. But being a Problem Children mentor is about more than mentorship and working with students – it is an opportunity to reflect on your broader goals, aspirations, and values. Taking time to reflect on what matters most to you (beyond this program) is an important way to gain clarity and ensure you are acting in accordance with your ideal self.

To aid your reflections on what matters most to you, we are including a few questions and prompts pulled (almost completely) from *Teaching For Purpose* by Stanford School of Education faculty member Heather Malin.

In Malin's book, she talks about how individuals find a sense of purpose in life. As Malin sees it, purpose is not a fixed element in our lives – it is something that grows as we do. It is a moving target that changes as we get closer to it.

To help readers get a sense of where they might find purpose, Malin includes the below prompts and questions. While understanding your life's purpose goes beyond the scope of our mentor training, these questions help you identify (and give language to) what is most important. This reflection will help you hold onto these ideas as we move through the summer. Sharing them will help us better understand each other and work together more efficiently and meaningfully.

With some minor edits for readability, the remainder of this chapter is taken directly from Malin's book.

...

First, spend a few minutes writing down some of the things that are most important to you. What really matters to you? You might only think of one or two things, but I encourage you to come up with a few things that might cover difference aspects of your life. If you find yourself thinking about many things, try to categorize them so you have general areas instead of specific things. For example, instead of naming each member of your family, you can think about "family" as something that matters. As you come up with a list of things that are very important to you, see if you can rank them so that you have two or three overarching aspects of your life that are clearly the most important to you, even if you have a long list of other things that are also important.

List three things that matter most.

1. _____
_____
_____

2. _____
_____
_____

3. _____
_____
_____

In the next step of this reflection activity, you will walk through some why, when, what, and how questions about the things that matter most to you, which can also be thought of as your most important values. These questions will help to paint a vivid and voluminous portrait of the aspects of your life that might be sources of purpose. First, think about *why* the things you listed above are most important to you. Make a list of the most compelling reasons (for yourself, not for others) that you listed these as the things that matter most to you.

Reasons the important things matter.

Why does it matter to you?

1. _____
_____
_____

2. _____
_____
_____

3. _____
_____
_____

When did each value in the first list become important to you? Is it a temporary interest or something that has mattered for a long time? Will it be important long into the future? These questions can help you think about how these values express your enduring identity by examining the connection between the things you value most, events in your past, and expectations of who you will be in the future.

Connection to identity.

When did it become important to you? *How long* will it be important?

1. _____
_____
_____

2. _____
_____
_____

3. _____
_____
_____

How energizing is each value in the first list? Does it drive you to set goals, make plans, and take action? These questions can help you think about whether the things that matter most to you are giving drive and direction to how you live your life.

Drive and direction.

How energizing is it? Does it motivate, drive, or direct your actions?

1. _____
_____
_____
_____

2. _____
_____
_____
_____

3. _____
_____
_____
_____

Thinking more broadly now, and not in connection to the important things you just ranked, answer the next two questions about your goals and activities. First, what are your most prominent goals right now? What are you planning for and hoping to accomplish?

Current goals.

What are your most prominent goals right now?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Next, think about the activities that you are involved in. How do you spend your time? What are some of the activities you spend most of your time on? When you have unstructured time, how do you use it?

Current activities.

What are the activities that you currently spend most of your time and energy on?

1. _____
_____
_____
_____

2. _____
_____
_____
_____

3. _____
_____
_____
_____

Reflect and integrate.

How do the things that matter most to you relate to your most prominent goals and activities?

1. _____
_____
_____
_____

2. _____
_____
_____
_____

3. _____
_____
_____
_____

Roadmap & rules

ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS WITH YOUR STUDENT

As you begin to work with your student in a one-on-one capacity, we've found it's helpful to lay out some goals about what these meetings should - roughly - look like.

The points below are written very explicitly, but should be understood more as suggestions. You should use your best judgement to make each meeting successful, engaging, and geared towards building a creative/working relationship with your student. That said, we've included some insight into what students will be experiencing and what they should be achieving for the first few meetings to help guide you.

Broadly, your meetings should be guided by your curiosity about your student. You are here to help them better understand themselves through the questions you ask, the connections you help them make, and the way you help them shape how they speak about, work on, and share their projects. You should also be helping your student make connections to things inside and outside their existing knowledge. Showing them how their ideas connect to other ideas is an important part of the process. Beyond that, you can show them how to rethink their own interests, projects, and practice. Understanding themselves, placing themselves in context, and looking ahead from there are some of your most important tasks as a mentor.

The other important part of your meetings is in your role as a planning, logistics, and accountability partner. You will be helping them define milestones, tasks, and metrics of success. You will help students express their needs to other mentors/staff so they can access resources that exist in our community. And you will be holding their feet to the fire with self-defined tasks and goals. Despite that, you must remember that they have chosen to be here, and your best tool to get

them to complete their tasks is through positive reinforcement, encouragement, and allowing for some level of flexibility.

Finally, these meetings should be geared towards levity and friendliness with a pinch of rigor. You should be guiding your student to stay positive, uplifting, and driven by the challenge that Problem Children presents them. There will be moments where students feel challenged, but if you create a relationship built on trust, mutual respect, and encouragement, you will be able to deftly help them navigate these difficult moments and come out stronger for it.

RULES OF THE ROAD

As a Problem Children mentor we trust in your capability to handle these meetings with aplomb and kindness. Still, we have created some rules that ensure success, safety, and conviviality.

HARD AND FAST RULES

The way meetings with your student play out (what day, what time, etc...) is up to you and your student, but there are just a couple hard line rules we want to call out. These exist primarily to make sure the relationship between you and your student has boundaries that help you both feel safe, connected, and unburdened by logistics.

* When meeting over zoom ALWAYS use the provided zoom link. They are fully open and can be used at any time. They are set to auto record. Recordings are archived and only reviewed in the case that something has gone awry, or to resolve a conflict.
* If meeting in person with your student, you must meet at Problem Library and are required to ensure that at least one other adult is in the building at all times.
* Make sure to be on time to your meeting (preferably a couple minutes early), dress appropriately, and are prepared to focus on your student.
* If any situation arises that feels beyond your control, or that causes you to fear for the safety, well-being, or success of your student - reach out to Daniel and Jeff as soon as possible. We will help you navigate the situation, and step in when necessary.
* Students are required to show up to meetings on time, or provide 24+ hours of warning if they will miss the meeting. If your student shows up more than 15 minutes late (without some kind of warning) or misses a meeting entirely, let Daniel and Jeff know.

HARD TO DEFINE RULES

* Use appropriate language with your student, and do not violate any of the rules from the code of conduct. Chief among those is talking ill or negative about any other students, mentors, or staff. You want to create a relationship built on a positive view of others and the world. If you find yourself needing to criticize another student/mentor/staff strongly reconsider, and if you still must, frame your criticism in the most positive way possible.
* When sharing about your own life, make sure to stay primarily focused on positives, or on how you have grown from negative experiences. Try to speak mostly about your creative practice(s) and endeavors.
* Steer your student away from using your time together as a therapy session. Usually the best way is to let a student vent, acknowledge any frustrations or pain points and take a beat. Whenever possible, try to help your student see what can be learned or gained. But this is not always necessary and can lead to digging in on the problem–use your best judgement in avoiding this sticky possibility.

THE SHAPE OF YOUR MEETINGS

Each meeting will be different, but the first few meetings are critical to building a good relationship with your student *and* helping them navigate the first few weeks of the program. If at any point you need more help, please reach out to staff.

If you use the points below as an initial guide, stay abreast of what is coming up in the group sessions, and use your intuition in working with your student, we are confident you will do well.

MEETING ONE: CURIOSITY

The first meeting is all about getting to know each other. Sharing about your history, creative practice (past, current, future), and your involvement with PC, PL, or other creative orgs are all great topics. This meeting will help set the tone for the rest.

As we've previously discussed, you are here to be a creative thinking/accountability partner to this student, so setting that as an expectation is key. The program will reinforce this to students as well, but it's important your actions and topics of conversation are aligned with this expectation.

This meeting should also focus heavily on asking your student questions. By now you will know them a little bit, but you should be working on developing a common language and camaraderie. Aside from general questions about their interests, background, etc... ask high level questions about what they're thinking about for their project. Start to think aloud with them about this.

MEETING TWO: BUILDING

For this meeting you should focus on talking about their project idea(s). Students will be tasked with presenting 2 ideas for their project at the following group session, so your meeting should be focused on helping them clarify their ideas enough to talk about them.

It is frequent that students have ideas that have a good deal of overlap, so you should help them clarify how each idea is distinct AND how they are related. This will help them better understand what is drawing their curiosity, what they are trying to express, and which path will provide more rich opportunities for creativity.

Depending on your student, they might have a presentation ready for you to review, which is great. If they don't, motivate them towards putting one together.

Overall your goal is to use this meeting to help them understand their idea better and get them excited about presenting their project. The best way to do that is to help them recognize the truth of the situation: it is an opportunity for growth and clarity rather than a test.

During the next group session, students will present their projects to the group. As a mentor your role is to let them do this on their own, but you should also act as a voice asking questions that highlight details they might forget in the harsh light of presenting to a group of ~14 other people that they still don't know super well yet.

An example: if during your meeting your student tells you that they are doing a photo project using a camera their grandparent gave them, but they neglect this detail during their presentation, you can ask them about the history of the camera during their presentation.

By being on their side, without doing the work for them, you will prove to them that you are on their team. This will underscore your position as a supporter of their ideas and creative thinking, and help deepen your bond.

MEETING THREE: DECISION MAKING & PLANNING

This meeting will take place after your student has presented their project ideas to the group and gotten feedback. This can be a tough meeting as students might feel defeated, not totally clear on what to do with feedback, or wanting to just blow up their ideas and start fresh. Or maybe they'll be excited and energized to get going.

Either way, for this meeting you should work with your student to help decide on a path forward, and to put some serious milestones on the calendar so you can help them move forward. This meeting is where the rubber starts to meet the road for your student. They are no longer in ideation mode - it is time to make a plan of action and get to work!

You'll also want to talk about their artist presentations which will be the activity for the subsequent group session. Each student will be assigned an artist to present on that is somehow related to their own creative practice, project ideas, or who might have some interesting insights if the student digs for them.

Come to this meeting having done at least 10-15 mins of your own research on the artist that was assigned to your student. Do this so you can talk about the artist with your student, and use what you've learned to ask leading questions that help your student explore how the artist might relate to their own work. For some students this will be pretty clear, for others it will be more opaque.

Whatever the case, helping your student make connections between established artists and their own work (and vice versa) is a great skill to help them learn. Figuring out how our own thoughts sit within the timeline of artistic expression and human exploration is imperative to knowing how we can uniquely contribute.

REMAINING MEETINGS: ACCOUNTABILITY AND ENGAGEMENT

For the remaining meetings with your student, your goal will be to help keep them on track, inspiring them to push themselves, and generally being a questioning, clarifying, and helpful presence. This will look different for each student.

Some students will need your help in breaking down steps to get to the next milestone in their project; others will need a voice of critique; still others will need your guidance in defining what is and isn't a part of *this* project. Most students will need some mixture of these and other supports.

Generally, you should be helping the student stay on track, continuing to develop your camaraderie, and doing whatever you can to help them overcome obstacles without stepping in to do things for them (except in very specific scenarios). From this point on, you'll be something like a project manager, cheerleader, and voice of reason.

It'll also be your job to surface any material needs the student has to the staff - after you assess if it's the right need. For example, if a student needs non-drying clay for a prototype, you should let staff know asap so we can organize getting that for a student. But before that, you should work with your student to understand if those materials are actually the right ones, or if there are other options, or maybe it's not needed at all!

While we will always do what we can to get students materials they need, it is also our role to make sure they are not being wasteful or going down irrelevant paths.