

# Friendships That Form Futures

Reflections on the roles  
mentors play in our lives

RICHARD A. JOHNSON

**I**t was ringing.

Then came the three-syllable answer on the other end: “Hee-yell-oh” (accent on the “yell”). I grinned as that funny and familiar greeting reached my ear.

“Hi, Sy. It’s Rich,” I said.

“Well, hello, Rich. I was just thinking about you,” he said. And I know he was.

I met Silas (Sy) Johnson when I was eighteen and needed a place to live. He and his wife, Geri, gave me free rein of their basement while I was working my way through the first few years of college. Sy had been a schoolteacher and principal, an entrepreneur and a small business owner. When I met him in his semi-retirement he was dabbling in real estate.

I connected to Sy when I began to serve at a local church where he was an elder. That connection came as a gift as I had never lived near extended family. Growing up with aunts, uncles, and grandparents was a privilege I hadn’t known. As my landlord and spiritual leader at the church, Sy became one of those missing voices in my life.

He liked to stay up late, so he was

often waiting for me when I arrived home after leading a rehearsal or youth group event. We would engage in small talk—sports, politics, and the day’s happenings—but Sy was a dreamer, and eventually those casual conversations gave way to what he saw on the horizon for me or for our new and rapidly growing church. His ideas were always bold and sometimes seemed a little ridiculous to me, but for Sy they were real and possible.

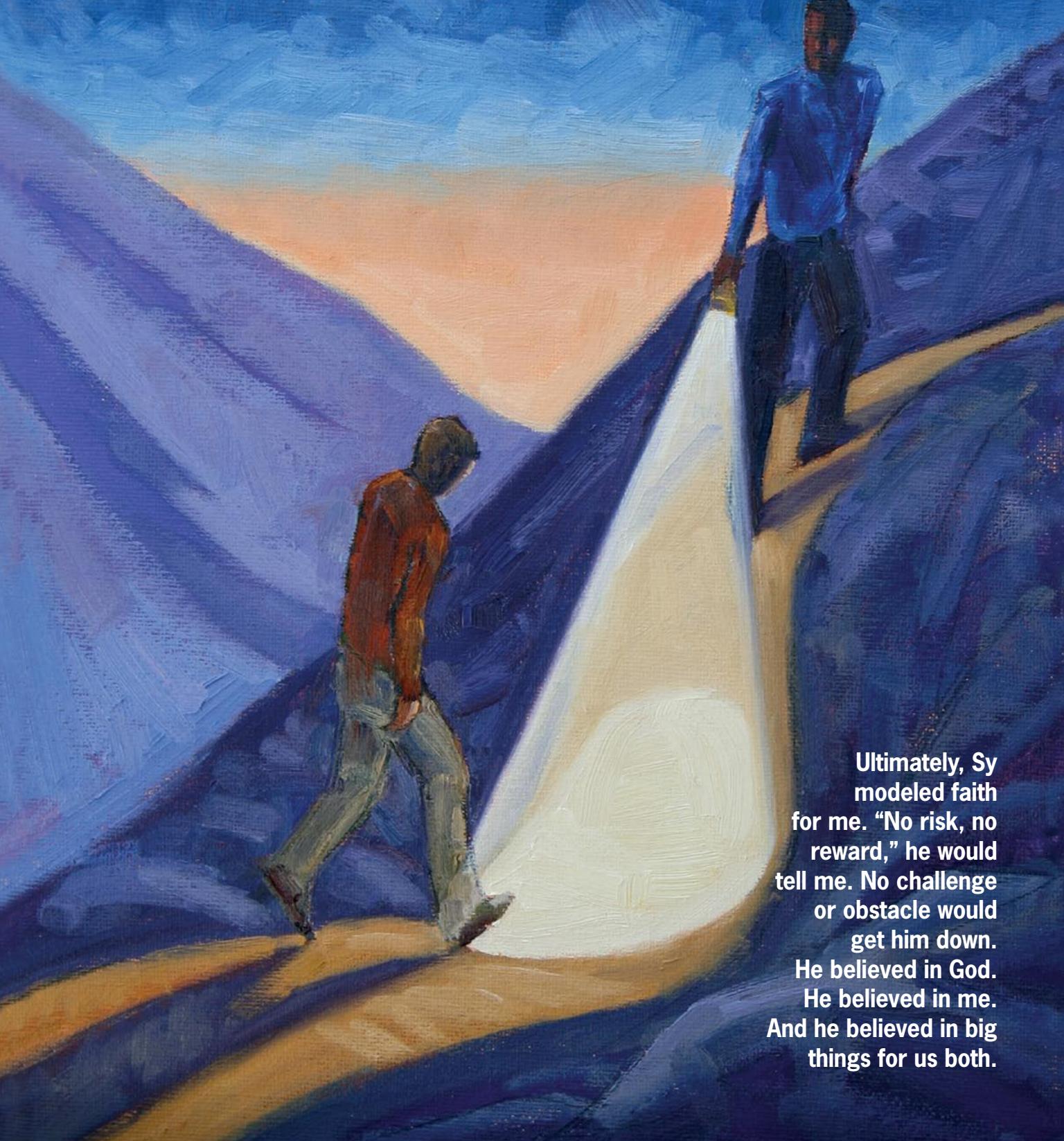
It was during that time that I learned what it meant to believe big. I remember the first time I heard this passage: “In the last days, God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams’” (Acts 2:17, TNIV; see Joel 2:28). With Sy, I felt I was experiencing this.

When I was a young adult, Sy had bigger plans for me than I had for myself. He was one of my greatest cheerleaders, offering audacious goals and pushing me to consider leadership positions or responsibilities that seemed beyond my capabilities or experience. He also pushed me

toward serious personal and spiritual growth. When it became clear that I had unresolved issues with my dad, he suggested I invite my father on a trip to spend some quality time together and work on our relationship. Sy also told me about his own struggles to be a good father and mistakes he had made.

In prayer, he encouraged me to learn to listen to God—not just talk to or at God. He also bravely confessed his own questions about God and life and the world. Ultimately, Sy modeled faith for me. “No risk, no reward,” he would tell me. No challenge or obstacle would get him down. He believed in God. He believed in me. And he believed in big things for us both.

Now most people wouldn’t have questioned Sy’s faith in God, but his faith in me was certainly a risk. He hadn’t known me that long. I had plenty of weak moments and bad decisions ahead of me. And I’m sure there were eventually disappointments. But Sy has always remained right beside me during this race—encouraging me from the sidelines and at times getting right out onto the track to help pick me up when I fall.



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Twenty years later, I still call to get Sy's advice and perspective on life. Now in a Covenant retirement community, he continues to generously give his time, share his insights, and encourage me. Even though I'm approaching forty, I sometimes feel like that restless twenty-something, wondering what my future holds. That was how I was feeling during our

recent phone conversation.

“Sy, I think I have two careers going at the moment, I'm not sure I can sustain both for much longer—and I'm not sure which one to choose.” I began to share my current frustrations, new ideas, and exciting opportunities. I talked, he listened. He asked questions, I responded—all the while realizing that he was helping

me discern where I am now and what might be next for me.

Sy is a graduate of North Park College (now University), and on this particular call he asked me to tell him about my current job at his alma mater. I began by describing

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my administrative and management responsibilities, the leadership development, team building, strategy, and vision casting—all things I enjoy and that seem to fit my gifts and abilities.

But then I began to talk about the students I have met, like the student whose dream it was to ride his bike across the country and initiate discussions about God's heart for justice. What began as my official role as trip adviser has grown into a deeper relationship as he and I discuss tough questions about theology and the church, job opportunities, relationships, and life after graduation.

I told Sy about the student from Africa who showed up in my office one day, asking me what forgiveness means, and how in the months since then I have gotten to listen to her story of heartbreaking dislocation and her search for a home with family and with God. At times I have been able to offer a piece of my journey as we compare what it is like to be in a difficult place spiritually, not knowing exactly where God is. Then I told Sy about the student who confided that his up-front happy and spiritually secure persona hides private struggles and a need to be fully known and accepted, and I

tell him how I was able to offer this student a safe place and the chance to walk together authentically.

As I told Sy about these students, I began to realize that my relationships with them hold similarities to my friendship with him. These are young adults who are looking for someone who has been on the road of life a little bit longer. They are looking for someone who has asked similar questions, someone who does not always draw conclusions but is willing to listen, be open, and sojourn together with them—maybe for a season, potentially for a lifetime.

I am sure Sy felt vulnerable over the years, letting me into his life. It can feel risky to let students into mine, to reveal my fears and my flaws, to let them contribute to who I am becoming. But the risk is minimal when compared to the way they enrich my life.

Sy expressed those same sentiments the last time I saw him. As I prepared to leave after a visit with Geri and him, he said something that I understand more clearly now that I have been in a mentoring role. With amazing strength for an eighty-year-old with an only 30-percent-functioning heart, he hugged me and said, "You

have been a huge blessing to me, Rich." I realize I can't minimize how rewarding it has been both to have a mentor like Sy and to be in relationships where others actually consider me a mentor.

In his book *Mentoring: The Ministry of Spiritual Kinship*, Edward Sellner writes, "Mentoring in its most fundamental sense is about transformation, helping someone else encounter his or her deeper self." In that sense, Sy has not been my only mentor. In fact, I have had several. They have ranged from a youth group leader who encouraged me to journal and gave me tools to deal with emotions in a healthy way, to an activist whose passion for addressing systemic injustice inspired my graduate thesis project; from a well-known emerging church leader and author who agreed to "mentor from a distance," to a professor who helped me understand and articulate a kingdom-focused gospel.

Some relationships have surfaced rather organically, and others I have sought out. Some relationships have lasted for a few years, others, I anticipate, will endure for decades. They have been women and men, black and white, Korean American and African,

## Looking to become a mentor?

**Practice active listening.** Learn to be fully present, to ask good questions, and to read body language. Don't interrupt. Don't think about what you will say next while the other person is talking. Reflect back what you hear, and pay attention to what isn't said.

### **Believe in and call out potential.**

Everyone needs someone to believe in them. As a mentor, you can see an individual's potential. You can see who he or she can become and dream together about the future. You can be a voice of challenge and affirmation.

**Offer friendship.** Mentoring is about a person, not a project. You don't have to know all the answers. Those who have the greatest impact on our lives walk alongside us, and together we learn to

walk with God.

**Invite questions, fears, and dreams.** Create a safe and nonjudgmental place to explore the unknown. Invite the other person to share deep longings, to work through struggles, and to identify hopes and goals.

**Share what you've learned.** One of the greatest gifts you have to offer is your own story and your wisdom. Graciously share who you are and what you have discovered on your journey.

## Looking for a mentor?

**Identify a person whose influence you desire in your life.** Begin with people who are already connected to you in some way. Consider how their mentorship of you could be meaningful.

**Ask to be in an intentional relation-**

**ship.** Explain why you admire this person and why you would like to spend some time together. Identify what you hope to learn from the relationship.

**Be flexible with how it looks.** Be prepared to offer specific ideas about what you hope for, but indicate your openness to whatever time, structure, and environment might work for the mentor.

**Approach a potential mentor as a humble learner.** Ask questions and listen. Seek the other person's ideas, advice, or perspective on specific questions or areas in your life. Always be gracious and thank them for their time.

**Be the real you.** Share who you are: your struggles, fears, dreams, hopes, questions, weaknesses, and goals. The more honest you are, the more meaningful the relationship you will develop. ■

pastors and bosses. Although it has been quite a diverse group of individuals, they also hold something in common. They are all regular people who have been willing to open up and share part of their journey with me so that I might discover and become who I am today. For that I am incredibly grateful.

My relationship with Sy came about through unique and seemingly fortuitous circumstances; however, it still required a desire and intention on my part to place myself in a posture of learning from him. I've heard people who want a mentor talk about it as if it won't happen. They assume others are too busy, uninterested, or for some reason will not find them "worthy." I disagree. My experience has been that if you are willing to ask and then be flexible in what the relationship might look like, most people find it a privilege to be a mentor.

People from all kinds of backgrounds and in almost any season of life have the potential to be a significant voice in the lives of a younger generation that is hungry for wisdom and relationship. There is no need to wait to be asked. We can reach out to the niece or nephew needing some time and encouragement, the neighbor with young children whose extended family lives across the country, the at-risk youth in the after-school program who is struggling to become more than just another statistic in the system.

As the phone call came to a close, Sy left me with some wise words—as he usually does.

"Rich, keep doing what you are doing until God tells you it is time to change. And then, take a step of faith."

His words are for all of us. Perhaps God is telling you to keep doing what you are doing. For others, it may be a time for change—to consider finding a mentor, or becoming one. It is a step of faith—but with the risk will likely come great reward. ■