

2022

## Dialogic Reciprocity and Contemplative Mentorship

Beth Connors-Manke  
*University of Kentucky*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci>

---

### Recommended Citation

Connors-Manke, Beth (2022) "Dialogic Reciprocity and Contemplative Mentorship," *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*. Vol. 9: No. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci/vol9/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Contemplative Inquiry by an authorized editor of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact [Jane.Monson@unco.edu](mailto:Jane.Monson@unco.edu).

# Dialogic Reciprocity and Contemplative Mentorship

**Beth Connors-Manke**

University of Kentucky

---

*While widely recognized as an important part of education, mentorship is rarely taught as a pedagogical practice. In my article, I theorize mentorship philosophically and contemplatively by considering Martin Buber's (1937) understanding of the I-Thou meeting. I also offer a taxonomy of mentorship, arguing that mentorship can recognize students' personhood and prefigure the I-Thou encounter. My final sections offer praxis-oriented discussions on listening and grading as a way to prepare students for intersubjective encounters.*

---

Mentorship is one way faculty welcome students into deep and sustained academic life. In some cases, one-on-one mentorship also becomes a faculty member's most relational interaction with a student: we sit with a student, pouring over class content or an academic plan; we respond to essays written out of a student's passions and emailed to us late at night. Yet, mentorship that runs this deep—a species of mentorship intrinsically congenial, even if there are moments of generative conflict—is rarely conceptualized philosophically and contemplatively.<sup>1</sup> In my paper, I describe a practice of mentorship between student and faculty member that is built upon dialogic reciprocity, a type of interactive relationship which takes as its warrants mutuality, immanent value, and self-determination. Dialogic reciprocity also assumes a personal relationality that, once established, *precedes, permeates, and exceeds* discursive contact.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a critical review of mentoring literature in higher education, see Crisp & Cruz (2009); for a discussion of mentoring models in higher education, see Dawson (2014); for mentoring in academic networks, see Sorcinelli & Yun (2007); for mentoring and self-regulated learning, see Schunk & Mullen (2013); for mentoring underrepresented students, see Haring & Freeman (1999), Haring (1999), and Portillo (2007).

I ground the term “dialogic reciprocity” in my own renewed consideration of Martin Buber’s (1937) philosophy of relationship between I and Thou. In classroom praxis, I have begun to see Buber’s work on dialogue as a guide in moments when the ontological reality of the other calls out for recognition. In Buber’s *I-Thou* relation, two persons meet in direct, immediate openness with mutuality and presence. The intent is to listen, not to persuade; to recognize the wholeness of the other, not reduce the partner to an identity.

The attention necessary for this type of encounter can be related to *kairos*, a term used in my discipline of Composition and Rhetoric. A fundamental concept in ancient Greece, *kairos* signifies the right or opportune time to take a specific type of action. The Greeks understood *chronos* to be the progression or duration of time, and *kairos* to be a “qualitative character of time, [the] special position an event or action occupies in a series, [a] season when something appropriately happens that cannot happen just at ‘any time’” (Smith, 2002, p. 46). In the interpersonal realm, Buberian dialogue asks us to attend to that kairotic moment of personal immediacy, of ephemerality, of making sense of self, other, world.

In discussing teaching, Powell (2013) describes kairotic pedagogy as alert to the particular forces in play with any one student, in any one semester. Attention to these forces sidesteps some of the *chronos*-bound mandates of normal curriculum development: transfer of skills from lower-division courses to higher; institutional retention rates; and the notion that the classroom is the boundary for learning. In essence, educators often assume that we are preparing students for something else—not for the exigence of this very moment (p. 13). In its most developed form, mentorship attuned to *kairos* and the immediacy of the other is sustained by mutuality; it does not function as one-way transmission of benefit from faculty to student. Mentorship based in dialogic reciprocity has additional pedagogical benefits. It can spur a teacher’s growth by providing the opportunity to witness students’ needs—an action inherent to hospitality. From that hospitably minded observation, a faculty member can fashion curriculum addressing cultural *kairos* as well.

In what follows, I first discuss Buber's philosophy of the *I-Thou* meeting to establish the phenomenological aspects of this type of relation. While Buber's philosophy resonates with some Eastern contemplative practices, I make clear the distinctions between Buber's relational dualism (in which differentiated personhood is understood to be real) and Eastern monism (in which distinctions between self and world are considered to be ultimately illusory). I then offer a taxonomy of mentorship, focusing on how organic-intentional mentorship can recognize students' personhood and prefigure the *I-Thou* encounter. In my final sections, I offer praxis-oriented discussions on listening and existential trust as a way to prepare students for intersubjective encounters.

### **Buber's Phenomenology of *I-Thou***

Martin Buber's book *I and Thou* (1937) has existential and phenomenological traits, and in his broader philosophy of dialogue, the phenomenological aspect is fairly strong. Phenomenology is a philosophical method in which one strives to encounter self, other, and world through direct apprehension of reality; to do this one tries to avoid imposing preconceived notions or structures on reality (Williams & Bengtsson, 2018, p. 16). Sokolowski (2000) writes,

Phenomenology recognizes the reality and truth of phenomena, the things that appear. It is not the case, as the Cartesian tradition would have us believe, that "being a picture" or "being a perceived object" or "being a symbol" is only in the mind. They are ways in which things can be. The way things appear is part of the being of things; things appear as they are, and they are as they appear. Things do not just exist; they also manifest themselves as what they are. (p. 14)

Phenomenology responds to the excessive turn toward subjectivity, a course charted by earlier philosophers such as Descartes and Kant (Royal, 2015, p. 80).

Developed by German philosopher Edmund Husserl, phenomenology influenced many European thinkers in the early twentieth cen-

ture, including some with strong religious commitments such as Edith Stein (who was Husserl's assistant) and others holding views on the "frontiers of faith" like Martin Heidegger (who followed Stein as Husserl's assistant) (Royal, 2015, p. 80). Husserl himself was born to non-Orthodox Jewish parents in Austrian Moravia and later converted to Protestantism (Beyer, 2020, p. 2). While not one of Husserl's students, Buber also had Jewish-Austrian roots and spent some of his professional life in Germany. Born in 1878, Buber had a life-long commitment to his Jewish religion and culture, studying (among many other things) Jewish mysticism, Jewish scripture, and religious phenomenology. The general arc of Buber's work traveled from mysticism to philosophy of dialogue, a trajectory shaped in part by his experiences with war in Europe. His 1904 dissertation was on medieval German mysticism (Mendes-Flohr, 2019, pp. 56-57), but he would come to reject the self-absorption at the heart of mysticism (Buber, 1974). Buber eventually emigrated to Israel and died there in 1965.

*I and Thou* is one of Buber's earlier works, composed when Buber was preoccupied with developing his approach to the phenomenology of religion. As some have noted, this stamped the text with a blurred, if not a confused, deployment of philosophy and religion (Zank & Braiterman, 2014, pp. 12-13). As a philosopher, Buber is known for his qualitative philosophical anthropology, which addresses "the place of the individual person in the world vis-à-vis other human beings in human community" (p. 18). Buber's philosophical thought reflected on the tension between distance and relation in human encounters. In his book *I and Thou*, Buber suggests we need to avoid the temptation to reduce human (and other) relations to the purely rational or the solely romantic; we need a mode of dialogue that puts us into immediate—hence phenomenological—contact with humans, animals, trees, and the Eternal Thou.<sup>2</sup>

As Buber sees it, we have two tendencies in encountering the world, both of which are necessary in life and can complement each

---

2 Buber believes *I-Thou* address can happen between humans, but also between humans and other entities like a tree or a piece of art (see Buber, 1937, pp. 7-8). In this article, I focus on human-to-human engagement.

other. One tendency is to relate to others in instrumental ways (what he calls an *I-It* relation). For Buber, the *I-It* relation is normative, encompassing many of our normal patterns of consciousness and our socially conditioned categories of thought. In this way, *I-It* relies on a subject-object cognitive structure. Buber (1937) writes: “I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something. The life of human beings does not consist of all this and the like alone. This and the like together establish the realm of *It*” (p. 4). In this case, two persons can be speaking together without ever truly encountering the wholeness of each other. The other is reduced to “the content of the observer’s own experience” (Kramer, 2003, p. 16).

This *I-It* relationship happens as a monologue, as it is one-sided: each person is caught in feelings, perception, imagination, or ideas—and the expressions of those things—rather than the mutual, liminal present moment. In *Between Man and Man* (2002a), Buber describes the dynamic of monologue: “[T]wo or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources” (p. 22). In this type of interaction, participants narrow their perceptual-cognitive fields such that each is bound and blinded by their own conditioned patterns. The consequence is that “[l]acking real otherness, monologue eliminates the possibility of being surprised” (Kramer, 2003, p. 33). While *I-It* is absolutely necessary to life—we would not have our academic disciplines without it—when it is the sole manner of relation, it is detrimental. Not only do we treat others as reified projections that fit our structures of thought, but we also lose the ability to recognize that relationship could be, if only momentarily, otherwise.

For Buber, this “otherwise” is the *I-Thou* relation: meeting the other’s presence as valuable, mysterious, and beyond instrumental concepts (Zank & Braiterman, 2014, p. 12). In Buber’s philosophy, the *Thou* is not an object of experience—neither an “it” nor a “he” nor a “she”—but an interhuman relationship and an event (Buber, 1937, p. 5, 30). Buber (1937) writes, “When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for

his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds" (p. 4). When one contends with the other as *Thou*—as uniquely whole—relational encounter is the only option; the phenomenological dynamic of this encounter includes immediacy, openness, few or no preconceived notions, and the intent to listen (not persuade). The felt sense is of yielding rather than controlling (Kramer, 2003, pp. 18-19, 24). While an *I-Thou* meeting is not possible with every person, nor is it desirable in every situation, it presents glimpses of relationship premised on the other was "a uniquely whole person, not merely as an identity" (Kramer, 2003, p. 19).

### **Relation Requires Distance**

For Buber, recognizing another's wholeness requires an intuition of the other's ontological distinctiveness. In "Distance and Relation" (2002b), Buber elucidates his understanding of distance:

Man, as man, sets man at a distance and makes him independent; he lets the lives of men like himself go on about him, and so he, and he alone, is able to enter into relation in his own individual status, with those like himself. The basis of man's life with man is twofold and yet one: The wish of every man to be confirmed as what he is, even as what he can become, by men; and the innate capacity in man to confirm his fellow men in this way. (p. 210)

The important philosophical point here is that relationship requires two things: differentiation *and* the ability to confirm the fact of the other's particular wholeness. Kramer (2003) articulates it well when he writes, "By thickening the distance between self and the other, I come to recognize you as a particular person" (p. 40). We can illustrate Buber's idea with a developmental example.<sup>3</sup> A child in utero is merged with her

---

<sup>3</sup> For Buber's own treatment of children in the context of I-Thou relation, see Buber, 1937, pp. 24-28.

mother, precluding relation as Buber describes it. The fetus, we presume, senses no differentiation from the mother-wholeness that envelops her. For the teenager, though, her parents may be instrumental to her as she is seeking to individuate—will they buy her a car? pay for her phone? are they frustrating her desire to stay out late? When she matures, she may then be able to “thicken the distance,” recognizing the joys and tragedies that shaped her parents’ lives. Her parents can then be persons to her.

Buber believes distance is a condition of recognizing the other as distinct, which then may allow relation, which then may allow an *I-Thou* meeting. It is important to note that *I-Thou* is not simply having a good relationship with someone. Even in deep friendship, the other is instrumentally or conditionally known. When I recognize *Thou* in another, I receive a glimpse of the “undefended essence” of that person (Metcalf & Game, 2008, p. 349). Characteristically, *I-Thou* encounters are momentary, being “an unexpected encounter with alterity—one cannot plan or predict an *I-Thou* relation, which occurs suddenly without warning” (Lipari, 2004, p. 125). Buber (1937) describes these encounters as *in*, but not necessarily *of*, time and space:

The *Thou* appears, to be sure, in space, but in the exclusive situation of what is over against it, where everything else can only be the background out of which it emerges, not its boundary and measured limit. It appears, too, in time, but in that of the event which is fulfilled in itself: it is not lived as part of a continuous and organised sequence, but is lived in a ‘duration’ whose purely intensive dimension is definable only in terms of itself. (p. 30)

Buber admits that *I-Thou* moments are alluring—they are glimpses of eternity—but cautions us against trying to remain in them. He says that it is categorically impossible to live in “the bare present”; we cannot live without the instrumental *I-It*, but we should not live with *I-It* alone (Buber, 1937, p. 34).



### Grace Engenders “the Between”

Although the *I-Thou* encounter happens briefly amidst time and space, it arrives only through grace. It is important to note that although study of religion was a central part of Buber’s life, here he does not use the term “grace” theologically. Rather, as Kramer (2003) writes, grace is a “spontaneously undetermined *presence of mutuality*, which cannot be activated by will alone” (p. 22). We can only make ourselves available to grace because *I-Thou* is “utterly without telos, aim, or intention” (Lipari, 2004, p. 125). So, while each partner may enter dialogue with openness and intention, grace necessitates an element of surrender. Buber (1937) describes it this way:

The *Thou* meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking.... The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting. (p. 11)

This understanding of grace presupposes that what is most valuable in an *I-Thou* encounter is “the between.” In other words, the meeting is not about each partner using the dialogue to develop an individual stance (although each person must have established selfhood in their own right); rather, the grace occurs as each partner moves toward the dynamic of interhuman relation (Kramer, 2003, p. 56).

From this presence of mutuality, the third dimension of the between arises. Buber uses the metaphor of a narrow ridge to describe the between: “On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where *I* and *Thou* meet, there is the realm of the ‘between’” (Buber, 2002a, p. 243). Because the between is rendered in initial duality, it is not a subjective inner experience or realization. In order to understand the between, “we must stop localizing the relation between human beings within individual souls or in some collective group that binds them, and must instead insist that this relation is something that happens literally between persons” (Gordon, 2011, p.

211). In Buber's philosophical anthropology, the between is where reality exists; the world, in its definitive wholeness, emerges in the between (Metcalf & Game, 2008, p. 348).

As is implied in the description of the between, *I-Thou* encounters are exclusive. The participants must be specific and defined—particularity matters. It is not that I am moved by all trees, but by a ginkgo on the corner of Rose Street when it bursts yellow in late October. It is not that I feel *agape* for all mothers who have lost sons to gun violence, but that I encounter Anita Franklin, whose son was shot in Duncan Park in 2014. The exclusive nature of *I-Thou* is, in part, functional: to move deeply into the present moment, I must have a particular other with which to encounter that present moment. Each becomes “reciprocally present,” creating the conditions for genuine meeting (Kramer, 2003, p. 45). I cannot become reciprocally present with all grieving mothers; however, through grace, I may with Anita Franklin.

### Turning Toward the Other

Buber's sense of the ebb and flow of the two life stands (*I-It* and *I-Thou*) calls to mind Taoist concepts of the Way as the natural order of the universe. Buber was, in fact, interested in Taoism as well as Buddhism and Hinduism. Although he ultimately rejected monism, Buber did find Eastern concepts of surrender and non-action germane to his thinking.<sup>4</sup> For example, in describing “the whole man,” Buber (1937) writes:

This is the activity of the man who has become a whole being, an activity that has been termed doing nothing: nothing separate or partial stirs in the man any more, thus he makes no intervention in the world; it is the whole man, enclosed and at rest in his wholeness, that is effective—he has become an effective whole. To

---

4 Buber came to believe that monism precluded both the “I” and the world. For his rejection of monism and absorption as a spiritual end, see Buber, 1937, part 3, and in particular pp. 71-72. For Buber's treatment of East Asian religions, see Friedman (1976) and Werblowsky (2002).

have won stability in this state is to be able to go out to the supreme meeting. (p. 77)

Buber posits the possibility of suspending normal ways of thinking, acting, experiencing—a particular type of phenomenological bracketing that suspends *I-It* presuppositions about the other, but assumes the existence of the other and, further, the ontological reality of the between.<sup>5</sup> As described above, Buber’s practice has some kinship with cultivating mindfulness. Peary (2016) writes, “Individuals who practice mindfulness attempt to become aware of but not reactive to that inner conversation as one element of any present moment” (p. 27). However, as Buber’s passage above indicates, non-reactivity (which might also be understood as a suspension of self-will) is a means, not an end. The end is the repeated movement toward genuine relationship.

Additionally, Buber’s thinking does *not* run in the direction of non-self, as may be found in some Eastern traditions, but toward an ontological sense of distinct wholeness. In interpreting Buber’s notion of surrender, Kramer (2003) writes, “for Buber, wholeness embodies suspending everything and anything that disallows me to be fully present in the moment (prejudices, assumptions, and so on), while still remaining uniquely myself without these” (p. 103). This understanding of wholeness makes the *I-Thou* movement highly personal and embodied. Attuned to the potential for encounter, I choose a particular other and, by grace, am chosen in return.

This readiness and mutuality are the ontological experience of “turning,” as Buber calls it. Buber’s philosophy anchors itself in turning toward the other, rather than bending back into oneself—toward deep bonding, away from self-oriented preoccupation. This is crucial, as it makes Buber’s thinking on *I-Thou* distinct from his earlier forays into mysticism; the focus on turning also rejects the traps of hyper-subjective thinking. As Kramer (2003) writes about these traps, “[t]his backward-bending movement privileges self-consciousness and withdrawal from entering into relationship with others. In other words, by allowing

---

5 For discussion of differing positions on bracketing in phenomenology, see Smith, 2018, pp. 13-14.

the other to exist only within my experience, the heart and soul of what is most *human* begins to get lost and dissipates. This happens when I turn my experience inward" (p. 158). On the other hand, turning toward the other is a movement away from alienation; it constitutes openness to "an elemental togetherness" (Buber, 2002c, p. 215). Rescued, temporarily, from my self-oriented way of being, I glimpse bi-directional consciousness: I am the other of my other. Buber (2002b) writes,

Our fellow men, it is true, live around us as components of the independent world facing us, but insofar as we grasp each one as a human being he ceases to be a component and is there in his self-being as I am; his being at a distance does not exist merely for me, but it cannot be separated from the fact of my being at a distance for him. (p. 212)

In Buberian dialogue, ontological insight into the real comes only when I can sustain certain contradictions during the *I-Thou* encounter: I am whole without my self-will; I am simultaneously particularly *I* and, to my partner, particularly *other*; the world exists in "the between" that arises during the impermanent conditions of *I-Thou*; I confirm the other as fully meaningful without engaging in approval or disapproval.

The metaphor of the narrow ridge seems particularly apt with the last contradiction. How does one fully confirm another, yet refrain from the act of judging approvingly or disapprovingly? We might first remind ourselves that *I-Thou* dialogue is—by nature—impermanent, spontaneous, and undetermined. Valid reasons for judgment do exist, and they resume when *I-Thou* inevitably becomes again *I-It*. However, as Buber (2002c) writes, once *I-Thou* arrives by grace, "no matter in what I am against the other, by accepting him as my partner in genuine dialogue I have affirmed him as a person" (p. 214). Confirmation accepts the other in the moment along with that person's potential, both of which speak to the deep human yearning for recognition. Additionally, Buber delineates between the interrelated aspects of acceptance, affirmation, and confirmation. *Acceptance* is the most elemental: I see you as a person like myself. *Affirmation* specifically recognizes the partner's unique per-

sonhood, including historical, cultural, and ethnic dimensions. *Confirmation* refines the recognition to the present moment: by accepting you as my partner in genuine dialogue, I validate your present beingness and your “direction of movement into the future” (Kramer, 2003, p. 197). All of this arises in the context of dialogic reciprocity.

### **Mentorship That Prefigures *I-Thou* Dialogue**

As one can see, Buber is very specific about the quality of, and conditions for, *I-Thou* dialogue. Instrumentality is disallowed. Preoccupation with subjective experience precludes it. The desire to persuade breaks the spell. Willfulness is a barrier. Nearly perfect reciprocity is fundamental. Additionally, Buber (1958) argues there is a “normative limitation of mutuality” that bars teachers, therapists, and pastors from truly moving into *I-Thou* while acting within their vocation (p. 132). Because mutuality requires each partner to imagine the other’s side in the dialogue, which Buber calls “inclusion,” it would dissolve the professional aspect of the relationship. As Kramer (2003) explains, “The teaching and healing and ministering relationships would become different kinds of relationships altogether if the student, patient, or parishioner were called to imagine the other’s side. They would become friendships” (p. 185). This distinction is crucial when considering mentorship of undergraduates, prodding us to consider what types of mentorship are called for within our institutions and with our particular students.

In their book *How College Works*, Chambliss and Takacs (2014) discuss the importance of mentorship. Their book is the product of a ten-year study of student retention and satisfaction at their small residential college. Over and over again, their results stressed the “people factor” as important for student retention and satisfaction. This meant that students needed to find a good group of friends early in their first year (this was number one) and needed to have one or two professors that they connected with in a positive way. Chambliss and Takacs also found that the classroom is the most effective and reliable relationship-builder for students and faculty. In other words, being together in the same

space, over time, created better interpersonal cohesion. Beyond the classroom, the even more valuable relationship was mentorship that “entail[s] a significant personal and professional connection, lasting more than one course or semester”; these relationships “can’t simply be assigned, but neither do they happen by accident” (p. 53). This points to the need for strategic thinking and contemplative practices that can yield meaningful mentorship.

In my time teaching at a large state university, I have observed several different types of mentorship duties, each with its own specific ends. From that experience, I offer a provisional taxonomy of mentorship:

*Institutionally mandated mentorship.* This would come in the form of assigned faculty advising, or other assigned student-faculty pairings, as well as advising theses or dissertations. This form of mentorship primarily serves institutional needs.

*Organic mentorship.* This mentoring is more relational in that it derives from a natural resonance between a student and a faculty member. It is intrinsically congenial, even if there are moments of generative conflict. Organic mentorship may grow out of shared enthusiasm for a topic of study, or shared life experience, or compatible life philosophies. This form of mentorship primarily serves interpersonal and academic needs.

*Intentional mentorship.* In this type of mentorship, a faculty member knowingly works with a student in the context of larger factors, whether they be sociocultural, economic, political, or field-specific. So, for instance, I may work with a student from a rural area on resume-building skills due to the economic depression of his home place. I may help a first-generation student see the resources that are available at my university, in order to keep her from dropping out and returning home. For a student struggling with mental health, I would direct him to the counseling center, but I may also offer additional “homework” in the form of reflective writing.

For example, a student of mine recently disclosed in an essay that she had been sexually assaulted. Per protocol, I contacted our Title IX office and discussed counseling options with her. However, I was also

attuned to the fact that she had chosen to tell *me* this story. I sensed that she trusted our relationship in some way. So, after having talked in my office, I offered her this extra “homework”: write a description of who she would be in twenty years. The student did not seem inclined to either on-campus counseling or Title IX action, but after a few weeks, she shared her lovely invention of her future self. So while I am not trained to counsel students on trauma, as a writing professor, I *am* trained in the ways writing can imagine a new world, the ways writing can call to life a way of being.

Clearly, there is operational thinking at work in this example, putting it in Buber’s realm of *I-It*. I am compelled by institutional ends, academic needs, and broad social issues. However, I do believe this example also prefigures *I-Thou* dialogue in a few ways: the sense of being chosen as a partner and responding to that call; the liminality that opened up outside my institutional responsibilities, which came in the form of an undetermined conversation between an older woman and a younger woman about life after sexual assault. The reaching toward engagement rather than toward answers; in this respect, I was following my student’s cues. Her situation was complicated and not suited to ready-made responses to sexual assault on campus. We needed to reach toward the between together. Nonetheless, I remained teacher—intentionally. As teacher, I was able to do what I could not have done otherwise: challenge her to write her future into being.

The example just described is a hybrid form of mentorship that I call *organic-intentional mentorship*. In these instances, the student needs to choose me and not the other way around; for my part, I need to stay alert in my classroom to students who seem to want mentorship, so I’m available when they are ready. That being said, this species of mentorship also requires some strategic thinking on my part. I ask myself a set of questions: What might this student need in the short-term? What might the student need in the long-term? Am I the right resource for either of those needs? And finally, do the student and I have an interpersonal relationship that will support my interventions as a mentor?

### **Preparing as Teacher for Encounter: Recognizing the Agency of Personhood**

The answers to those questions come, in part, from a philosophy of personhood to which Buber's thought is connected: personalism. This structure of thought has both philosophical and theological strains; it flourished during Buber's era, especially in Germany, Poland, and France. Personalism, I argue, can be used as a framework for the *I-It* relation (which is most of our lives) and can prepare the ground for the rare *I-Thou*. Williams and Bengtsson (2018) outline personalism in this way:

Personalists regard personhood (or 'personality') as the fundamental notion, as that which gives meaning to all of reality and constitutes its supreme value. Personhood carries with it an inviolable dignity that merits unconditional respect.... For personalists, a person combines subjectivity and objectivity, causal activity and receptivity, unicity and relation, identity and creativity. Stressing the moral nature of the person, or the person as the subject and object of free activity, personalism tends to focus on practical, moral action and ethical questions. (p. 3)

Recognizing our students as "the subject and object of free activity" is essential to mentorship. If we do not recognize and openly affirm our students' capacity for agency, we have little of value to offer them, I believe. For personalism, a person is acted upon by external forces but also acts from within, from the core of that person's subjectivity. Because of this dynamic, each person resists definition—is irreducible to any trait, quality, category, or label. Articulating personhood in the educational context, Buber (1958) writes: [the teacher] must not know [the student] as a mere sum of qualities, strivings, and inhibitions, [the teacher] must be aware of [the student] as a whole being and affirm him in his wholeness" (p. 132). At the same time, personalism also suggests that agency is connected to relationship, to intersubjectivity. Individuals are neither to be set above inter-relation, nor are they to be subsumed in it. Each person is to be granted the agency, in the context of "relational



openness," "to make of the self a gift to another" (Williams & Bengtsson, 2018, p. 11).

As we know with our undergraduates, little about personhood is static, which is one of the reasons good mentorship is important. Scruton (2015) pinpoints why this understanding is important:

[P]ersonhood is a way of *becoming*, not just a way of being.... Personal relations are a *calling to account*. I give reasons to you and ask for reasons in return. I explain myself through describing what the world means in my perspective. I am answerable to you for what I say and do, and you likewise to me. It is not that these features of our condition flow from our transcendental freedom, as Kant would put it. They are *what freedom consists in*. Freedom and accountability are coextensive in the human agent. (pp. 40-41)

The value in mentoring that is intentional, organic, and prefigural of *I-Thou* (rather than fully *I-Thou*) is that we, as teachers, can hold in mind this becoming aspect of our students' personhood. We remain slightly and mindfully removed from full reciprocity, but for good reason: to keep the becoming of our student central to our wholly present response. We also do it with educational purposes in mind.

One might contemplatively prepare for these moments by asking, How can I tune my perceptions to my student's particularity? How can I maintain my institutional responsibilities yet respond to a mentee in terms of her educational becoming? Because these questions are both contemplative, they are not meant for rationalized answers. Any answers that may come would be insufficient because—as Buber and personalism teach us—each of our students is particular and irreducible. Answering the questions broadly may not answer them for any specific case. Nonetheless, I would argue that this is the delight of contemplative practice: intentionally engaging in structured practice and then stepping into the liminal moment. Contemplative practice prepares one both for the arising of the *I-Thou* encounter and for pulling subtly back when our vocation as teacher insists on it.

The issue of vocation is important here, especially because we live in a culture in which the therapeutic is dominant and therapeutic address is expected. In my experience, the line between mentoring students in my discipline and recognizing students' mental health needs has become increasingly blurred. When I started teaching more than twenty years ago, I was rarely asked by students or by administrators to be a "first responder," so to speak, when it comes to social and emotional issues. Today, however, it is quietly considered part of my job to look for signs of anxiety, trauma, and suicidal thoughts. Additionally, students themselves sometimes expect that I play a therapeutic role. While I dutifully direct students to counseling resources—and wholeheartedly hope that they find psychological healing—my role as teacher is distinct: to educate in my discipline, to demonstrate the fruits of the life of the mind, and to help students integrate their intellectual endeavors with the whole of their lives.

### **Preparing Students for Encounter: Listening**

I have been describing an approach to mentorship that focuses on the instructor. Buber's phenomenology of dialogue, personalism's understanding of personhood, and contemplative inquiry questions can all prime us to meet our students more fully in learning and in mentorship. However, what about preparing students for that encounter? If our students have been trained to live predominantly in instrumental *I-It* ways, intersubjective possibilities can go unrecognized, or maybe even actively rejected. To orient students to the possibility of encounter, I model several kinds of listening: rhetorical listening, active listening, and Buber's "genuine listening." I survey these approaches here for a few reasons. First, to show that there is variety to the practice of listening: how to listen is neither simple nor self-evident. Second, to highlight that Buber's approach is an *ontological practice*.

One predominant approach in my field is called "rhetorical listening." Ratcliffe (2005) distills rhetorical listening to "a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to *any* person, text, or culture" (p. 17). Ratcliffe's project is more specific than this, though; she is concerned about barriers to cross-cultural communication, especially

in terms of race and gender. In this framework, rhetorical listening is a third way, so to speak, in the dilemma of commonalities and differences. On one hand, we have a tradition of discourses that erase cultural differences by assuming that there is generally one universal Subject. On the other hand, our identity-based discourses tend to erase the possibility of commonality (Ratcliffe, 1999, p. 197). Ratcliffe sees rhetorical listening as a way to discern dimensions of self, rhetor, and culture that are beyond the foreground, or below the surface. Ratcliffe (1999) wants to “[stand] under the discourses” that we and others create, “listening for the (un)conscious presences, absences, unknowns” (p. 206). Ratcliffe (1999) is quick to assert, though, that this type of listening entails a responsibility to stand for fairness and justice while reflexively questioning our own particular standards (p. 203).

While rhetorical listening attends primarily to cultural discourses undergirding communication, active listening is oriented to interpersonal confirmation. Active listening can be used in a variety of situations, but the process is often associated with the psychotherapeutic work of Carl Rogers. In this approach, the listener suspends judgment, listens with intention or purpose, practices pausing, rephrases the other’s communication, and looks for the emotional valence of the message. Additionally, “the active listener is expected to avoid spontaneous reactions when actively listening, as these are thought to be disruptive to communication”; the goal is to create a pleasant environment and promote a trusting client-therapist relationship (Leisten et al., 2021, p. 1). In a study on active listening in the classroom, Bletscher and Lee (2021) note that the practice can include problem-solving and the intent to discover commonalities between interlocutors (p. 162).

However, it is important to distinguish rhetorical and active approaches from Buber’s “genuine listening.” Unlike rhetorical listening, the goal of genuine listening is not to recognize and remediate the cultural constructs in which we are all embedded. Likewise, Buber’s genuine listening does not seek to communicate a lot of feedback as active listening does; nor does Buberian listening caution against spon-

taneous reactions.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Buber (2002c) affirms a type of unrestrained communication: “But in the great faithfulness that is the climate of genuine dialogue, what I have to say at any one time already has in me the character of something that wishes to be uttered, and I must not keep it back, keep it to myself” (p. 214). None of this is to say that Buber denies the need for feedback or the reality of cultural difference. However, in the specificity and rarity of the *I-Thou* encounter, I turn toward the other, totally available to the uniqueness of the moment with that particular person. No ideas about how I should respond—including well-meaning therapeutic or socio-political scripts—suffice because an *I-Thou* meeting is spontaneous, unanticipated, and undetermined (Buber, 1937, p. 95).

### **The Test of Encounter and Trust: (Un)Grading**

The fundamental openness of an *I-Thou* meeting requires an unconditional trust that recognizes both the possibility of dialogue and the potential for emotional pain in the encounter. Yet, as Friedman (1972) writes, the trust also includes the courage to handle the pain and to accept that real relationship—because it involves two persons, not one—is “beyond the control of our will” (p. 320). Friedman, who was influenced by Buber, calls this trust “existential” because it is not about confidence in guaranteed, positive outcomes; rather, when we go out to meet another, there is always the risk that the other will not step forward to meet us in return (p. 320). Additionally, the well from which I draw when encountering the other is deeper than I can know: “We address others not by conscious mind or will but by what we are. We address them with more than we know, and they respond—if they really respond—with more than they know. Address and response can never be identified

---

6 In 1957, Buber and psychologist Carl Rogers had a public discussion at the University of Michigan in which they disagreed about the degree of mutuality in a therapist-client interaction. Rogers believed that full mutuality obtained between him and his clients. Buber disagreed, pointing out that the therapist must maintain a distinct responsibility for the therapeutic context, while the client is there to pursue his own psychological needs. Buber (1958) eventually added a postscript to *I and Thou*, articulating this view; see section 5 of postscript. The Buber-Rogers discussion can be found in Buber’s *The Knowledge of Man* (1965). For another transcript and commentary of the debate, see Anderson & Cissna (1997).

merely with conscious intent or even ‘intentionality’” (Friedman, 1972, p. 324). Hence, the need for deeply attentive and open listening, a listening as attuned to resonances as it is to discursive meaning.

I would like to present a final pedagogical moment that leans toward Buber’s understanding of existential trust in an *I-Thou* meeting. In this situation, the “normative limitation of mutuality”—that is, the social asymmetry due to student-teacher roles—is even greater because the subject is grading. Yet, even with grading there is potential for a less instrumental, and more dialogic, exchange.

I have experimented with grading approaches throughout my career; my intention has been to focus students on learning for the sake of learning. Early attempts included only giving comments for much of the semester and, in another instance, contract grading. Recently, I have tried two other systems: Nilson’s (2015) specifications grading and “ungrading.” In my experience, alternative grading systems need to be organic to the content of the course itself. For example, when I teach editing, I use a point system because specific errors do matter in an editor’s work life. In a writing course titled “On Living Well,” I employed ungrading because my learning objectives included student self-efficacy and autonomy.<sup>7</sup> I only marked each assignment complete or incomplete based on parameters set for that assignment. To determine the final grade, students conferenced with me and made their case for *the quality of their learning* and suggested a letter grade that fit. To preserve my due diligence, I reserved the right to determine the grade if their case was divorced from reality.<sup>8</sup>

It turns out that, for some students, this was the hardest assignment all term. They had to bring some mandated documents to the confer-

---

7 See Stommel (2018) and Supiano (2019).

8 Other teachers are often curious about whether students gave themselves “honest” grades. In this class, no one dramatically inflated their grade. At least one student gave himself a grade lower than I would have; I turned in the grade he suggested to the registrar. I do not think this form of grading is appropriate to every class. I assume the final conferences were largely successful because I knew the students well enough that they felt responsible for an honest assessment of their work.

ence, including an appraisal of their assignments and attendance, as well as answers to questions about their learning. The documentation portion was not the hard part. Rather, the arduous aspect was showing up at the professor's office and making a case for themselves. They all did fine, though, and perhaps even grew through this final challenge. I am convinced that these tremulous conferences would not have been possible without a nascent existential trust we had built together in the classroom. I believe that trust grew from a consistent approach on my part to challenge students while simultaneously confirming each student's particular wholeness. They had been conditioned to expect both challenge and confirmation from me, so when the really big encounter came, they could endure the risk.

However, the difficulty of that situation for a student had not occurred to me. It was only revealed as each student came to my office. As I listened, I asked myself both "Is his case for his grade a valid one?" and "In what way is he tolerating vulnerability?" The dissonance between my assumptions and some students' anxieties was a humble reminder that mentorship and teaching, at their best, are about "the between" that Buber talks about. About the reciprocity and trust that are necessary between all of us in the classroom. About the openness toward each other that creates and sustains reality.

How were these grading conferences a form of mentorship, one might ask. From one angle, they may only seem like successful teaching. Chambliss and Takacs (2014) found in the data from their study that good teachers—specific teachers—are a large part of successful intellectual and socio-emotional growth for undergraduates. They found several characteristics of good teachers: they "are exciting to students, accessible to students, engaged with students" (pp. 47-48). Valuable teaching shades toward mentorship, I would argue, when "good teachers begin to engage students with a kind of provisional equality" (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014, p. 48). I understand this provisional equality to be the respect accorded to another who is likewise engaged in the same grand project. Maybe that project is the artistry of words or materials, or the profundity of large and difficult ideas, or the close observation of the natural world and its order.

With provisional equality, a little of the institutional hierarchy falls away. This turn in the relationship allows the opportunity for mentorship, of which the defining characteristic is “a concern for the student beyond the immediacies of the course” (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014, p. 54). My grading conferences were built on provisional equality, not just in terms of engagement with the course content but also with the central power dynamic in a course: grading. I was very invested in whether my students could be honest with themselves and with me about the quality of their learning. Realistic self-appraisal and agency were learning outcomes more organically tied to the content of the course than any particular grade would have been. By loosening the institutional hierarchy—but not relinquishing my professional responsibility—I was able to listen more openly to students as they made their case. Mentorship that takes place with this dynamic, I hope, prefigures fuller *I-Thou* encounters students may have in their lives.

### **Conclusion**

Our current world is powerfully and detrimentally monological. Our cultural predilection for technological mediation, rather than presence, makes *I-Thou* even less likely. In that context, even imperfect gestures toward *I-Thou* are important; our classrooms, shaped by contemplative practice, can plant the seeds for richer relationality.

That relationality can come in the form of mentorship that draws our students forward into the classroom and into our disciplines. Each discipline posits some big question about human life, whether that question be about truth, beauty, humanity, or the natural world. Those questions can draw us away from alienation and toward inquiry together, toward discussion together. In cultivating a sense of dialogic reciprocity in ourselves and in our students, we become available to moments of immediacy with other persons, but also—as Buber knew—with animals, plants, and the transcendent. This matters for our students’ lives today and for their education long-term.

## References

- Anderson, R. & Cissna, K. (1997). *The Martin Buber-Carl Rogers dialogue : a new transcript with commentary*. State University of New York Press.
- Beyer, C. (2020). Edmund Husserl. In E. N. Zalta (Principal Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (pp. 1-40).
- Bletscher C. G. & Lee, S. (2021). The impact of active empathetic listening on an introductory communication course. *College Teaching*, 69(3), 161-168.
- Buber, M. (1937). *I and thou*. (R. G. Smith, Trans.). T&T Clark.
- Buber, M. (1958). *I and thou*. (R. G. Smith, Trans.) (2nd ed.). Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Buber, M. (1965). *The knowledge of man: A philosophy of the interhuman*. (M. Friedman and R. G. Smith, Trans.). Harper & Row.
- Buber, M. (1974). Foreword. *Pointing the way: Collected essays*. Schocken.
- Buber, M. (2002a). *Between man and man*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Buber, M. (2002b). Distance and relation. In A. D. Biemann (Ed.), *The Martin Buber reader: Essential writings* (pp. 206-213). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Buber, M. (2002c). Genuine dialogue. In A. D. Biemann (Ed.), *The Martin Buber reader: Essential writings* (pp. 214-215). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chambliss, D. & Takacs, C. (2014). *How college works*. Harvard University Press.
- Crisp, G. & Cruz, I. (2009). Mentoring college students: A critical review of the literature between 1900 and 2007. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(6), 525-545.
- Dawson, P. (2014). Beyond a definition: Toward a framework for designing and specifying mentoring models. *Educational Researcher*, 43(3), 137-145.
- Friedman, M. (1972). *Touchstones of reality: Existential trust and the community of peace*. E. P. Dutton.



- Friedman, M. (1976). Martin Buber and Asia. *Philosophy East and West*, 26(4), 411-426.
- Gordon, M. (2011). Listening as embracing the other: Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. *Educational Theory*, 61(2), 207-219.
- Haring, M. J. (1999). The case for a conceptual base for minority mentoring programs. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 74(2), 5-14.
- Haring, M. J. & Freeman, K. (1999). Editors' introduction. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 74(2), 1-4.
- Kramer, K. P. with M. Gawlick. (2003). *Martin Buber's I and Thou: Practicing living dialogue*. Paulist Press.
- Leisten, L. M., Findling, F., Bellinghausen, J., Kinateder, M., Probst, T., Lion, D., & Shiban, Y. (2021). The effect of nonlexical verbal signals on the perceived authenticity, empathy and understanding of a listener. *The European Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 10(1), 1-7.
- Lipari, L. (2004). Listening for the other: Ethical Implications of the Buber-Levinas encounter. *Communication Theory*, 14(2), 122-141.
- Mendes-Flohr, Paul. (2019). *Martin Buber: A life of faith and dissent*. Yale University Press.
- Metcalfe, A. & Game, A. (2008). Significance and dialogue in learning and teaching. *Educational Theory*, 58(3), 343-356.
- Miller, C. R. (2002). Foreword. In P. Sipiora & J. Baumlin (Eds.), *Rhetoric and kairos: Essays in history, theory, and praxis* (pp. xi-xiii). State University of New York Press.
- Nilson, L. B. (2015). *Specifications grading: Restoring rigor, motivating students, and saving faculty time*. Stylus.
- Peary, A. (2016). The role of mindfulness in kairos. *Rhetoric Review*, 35(1), 22-34.
- Portillo, S. (2007). Mentoring minority and female students: Recommendations for improving mentoring in public administration and public affairs programs. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 13(1), 103-113.

- Powell, P. R. (2013). *Retention and resistance: Writing instruction and students who leave*. Utah State University Press.
- Ratcliffe, K. (1999). Rhetorical listening: A trope for interpretive invention and a "code of cross-cultural conduct." *College Composition and Communication*, 51(2), 195-224.
- Ratcliffe, K. (2005). *Rhetorical listening: Identification, gender, whiteness*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Royal, R. (2015). *A deeper vision: The Catholic intellectual tradition in the twentieth century*. Ignatius Press.
- Schunk, D. H. & Mullen, C. A. (2013). Toward a conceptual model of mentoring research: Integration with self-regulated learning. *Educational Psychology Review*, 25(3), 361-389.
- Scruton, R. (2015). The person and the parson. In J. R. Stoner, Jr. & H. James (Eds.), *The thriving society: On the social conditions of human flourishing* (pp. 37-47). The Witherspoon Institute.
- Smith, D. W. (2018). Phenomenology. In E. N. Zalta (Principal Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (pp. 1-44).
- Smith, J. E. (2002). Time and qualitative time. In P. Sipiora & J. Baumlin (Eds.), *Rhetoric and kairos: Essays in history, theory, and praxis* (pp. 46-57). State University of New York Press.
- Sokolowski, R. (2000). *Introduction to phenomenology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sorcinelli, M. D. & Yun, J. (2007). From mentor to mentoring networks: Mentoring in the new academy. *Change*, 39(6), 58-61.
- Stommel, J. (2018, March 11). How to ungrade. *JesseStommel.com*. <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>
- Supiano, B. (2019, July 19). Grades can hinder learning: What can a professor do? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. [https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190719\\_ungrading](https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190719_ungrading)
- Werblowsky, R. J. Z. (2002). Buber and the east Asian (Chinese) religions. In P. Mendes-Flohr (Ed.), *Martin Buber: A contemporary perspective* (pp. 166-173). Syracuse University Press.

Williams, T. D. & Bengtsson, J. O. (2018). Personalism. In E. N. Zalta (Principal Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (pp. 1-47).

Zank, M. & Braiterman, Z. (2014). Martin Buber. In E. N. Zalta (Principal Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (pp. 1-35).