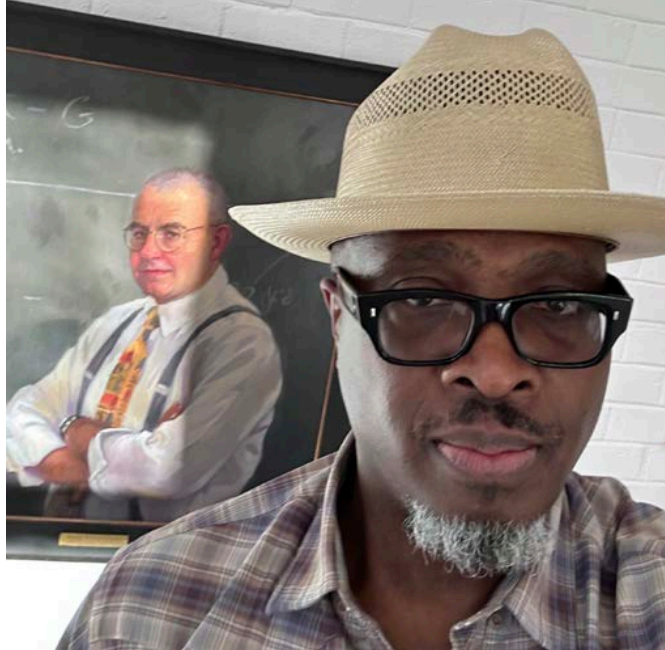


The Empty Cup

*By Curtis R. Joseph, Jr.
Louisiana State Bar Association
2026–27 President*



As he prepared to leave home to fight in the Trojan War, Odysseus placed the care and custody of his palace and his son, Telemachus, in the hands of his trusted friend, Mentor. At the time of Odysseus' departure, Telemachus was only an infant. As the story goes, approximately twenty years passed before Odysseus' return to Ithaca. By then, young Telemachus had come of age. Given this paradigm, we can easily see how vital Mentor's role was to Telemachus' maturation. Without Mentor's guiding hand, the young man wouldn't know what he didn't know.

Modern usage of the term "mentor" signifies someone who imparts wisdom to and shares knowledge with a less-experienced colleague. Although Homer wrote of the mythological Mentor near the end of the 8th century BCE, the current connotation only dates to the 1700s. Nevertheless, it is a concept as old as time itself and one that has been recounted across many cultures. That said, one of my favorite iterations is the story of a wise Zen master, who drew people from afar to seek his help. In turn, the master would teach his students and show them the way to enlightenment. On one such occasion, the master received a visit from a particular scholar, who said, "I have come to ask you to teach me about Zen." However, it was immediately obvious to the master that the would-be scholar was already full of his own opinions and perceived knowledge. By that, he often interrupted the master, and he typically spent more time speaking than listening.

Ultimately, the master suggested that they have tea. While pouring tea for his guest, the master continued to pour, even after the cup overflowed and spilled onto the table, the floor and the scholar's clothing. Confused by the master's actions, the scholar cried, "Stop! The cup is full already. Can't you see?" To this, the Zen master smiled and calmly replied, "You are like this cup — so full of ideas that nothing more will fit in." And, with that, the master sent the student away, only to return when he could do so with an empty cup. In this regard, the master illuminated the fact that the mentor-mentee relationship, like most relationships, operates on a two-way street, with each party bearing the responsibility for playing their re-

spective role.

As I approach my third decade in the practice, I find that I spend more time relying upon the lessons that my various mentors have imparted upon me. To that point, as I take part in our Memorial Exercises at the Louisiana Supreme Court, my mind drifts to the many mentors from whom I've been blessed to learn.

During my first year of law school at Washington and Lee, I was effectively a fifth-year senior because I'd also attended Washington and Lee for undergrad. I had my fair share of friends "on the other side of the river." I was playing drums in a band and living my best life. It all changed in an instant. I entered the law school one morning and prepared to enter Professor Roger Groot's Criminal Procedure class. Groot had other plans. He was standing outside the classroom like a centurion, arms folded. As I approached the classroom, he looked me squarely in the eye and said, "Mr. Joseph, you can do better and you will do better." My sheepish response, "Yes, Sir." Groot: "Do we understand one another?" Curtis: "Yes, Sir." At that point, Groot stood aside and allowed me to enter the classroom.

By the end of the following school year, I found myself routinely in Groot's presence. He'd selected me to join his Alderson Legal Practice Clinic, performing work for the female inmates at Alderson Federal Prison Camp in West Virginia. As we drove to the prison camp one afternoon, I asked Groot how it was that I came to be one of the students in his clinic. He looked at me and said that it was an all-women's prison camp, and I was a handsome fella. Wait, what? We drove a few miles and then he said, "You never want it to be said that you have a lot of potential." We drove in silence for about 15 miles and, then, it hit me like a wet rag. He saw talent in me that was not being realized.

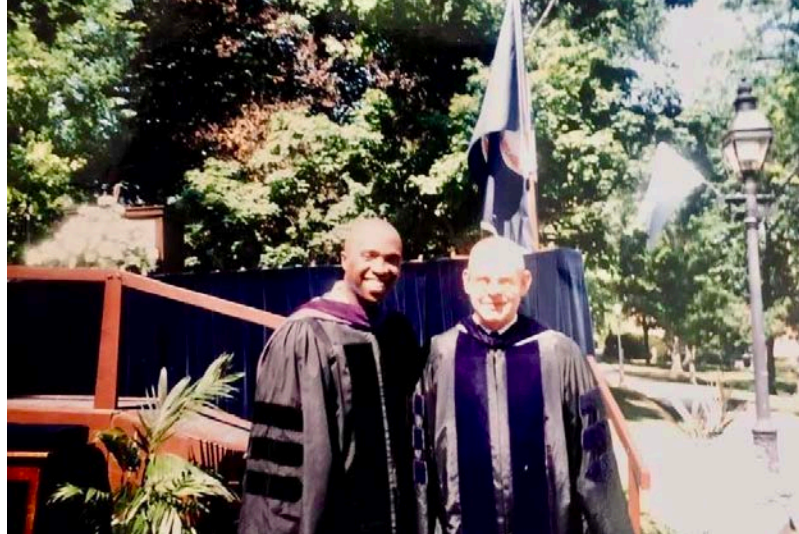
A few years later, when I passed the Louisiana bar exam, I actually called Groot before I called my mother. He was the person I wanted to share the news with first. I asked him what it was that he'd seen in me at a time that I didn't see it in myself. He said he'd seen a boatload of talent with no

direction. He told me that I'd be an amazing leader once I figured it out.

Beyond those who have assisted me throughout my legal career, I thought of Mrs. Culpepper, my 4th grade teacher, who encouraged me to record my thoughts, and to spend time expressing myself through the written word. I thought of Georgia Lee, my high school history teacher, who nurtured my penchant for studying history and politics. I thought of Eddie Kozak, my drum teacher, who did not suffer fools. Notwithstanding my mother, Mr. Kozak may well have been the most demanding teacher that I've had. Succinctly put, my list of Zen masters goes on ad nauseam and applies across many disciplines.

According to the prevailing notion of his day, conventional wisdom held that Socrates was the wisest of all. However, for his part, Socrates offered, "I know that I know nothing." As lawyers, we continue to reap benefits from having learned law through the Socratic method. Although the method itself may have intimidated us, it taught us to become critical thinkers and to approach the law from an intellectual standpoint. Nevertheless, in Abraham Lincoln's era, most lawyers did not attend law school. Custom of the day dictated that would-be lawyers often "read law" under established lawyers. In that regard, reading law was tantamount to an internship or an apprenticeship under the watchful eye of a seasoned lawyer.

Succinctly put, the art of the mentor is to see that kernel embedded within the mentee and to draw it out. Throughout our lives, we will encounter various types of mentors. Some



Curtis R. Joseph, Jr. and Professor Roger Groot at Washington and Lee University's graduation ceremony. Photo courtesy of the Joseph family.

will assist us in honing our craft. Some will champion our cause. Others will lend an ear in times of need. From time to time, the mentee may even assume the role of mentor. That said, the relationship presupposes a measure of reciprocity. Trust, however, that the relationships forged in the process will last a lifetime. To those of us who are now through the looking glass, I ask, "Who are you mentoring?" And, to the would-be mentee, I ask, "Are you holding up your end of the bargain?"

My kindest regards,
Curtis - #86

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