

LETTERS

Meetings with Mentor

Archimedes, Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Pythagoras would have known who Mentor was. Today the name of this legendary character is usually a prosaic noun or verb, used for a variety of great and small roles in people's lives, such as teacher, professional benefactor, thesis advisor, corporate role model, or sports coach.

In the *Odyssey* of Homer, Mentor is an old friend of Odysseus to whom that island king had entrusted his household when he departed his home, Ithaca, to fight in the Trojan War. The goddess Athena often assumes Mentor's shape and voice when she acts publicly on behalf of Odysseus and his son, Telemachus, leading them to display their inherent strengths. At the epic's conclusion, Athena, appearing to be Mentor, prevails upon the Ithacan factions to restore civic harmony. To residents of Ithaca, therefore, Mentor could be their elder neighbor, or he could actually be the disguised Athena. In Book IV of the *Odyssey*, an Ithacan local is puzzled that he had seen Mentor in Ithaca the previous morning but had also seen him depart on a ship with Telemachus several days earlier.

In legend and myth, there have been many other loyal neighbors and deities championing their favorite heroes. I believe that the ambiguity of who Mentor is when we come across him (or her) has contributed to this eponymous term. That is, Mentor may be merely the familiar elder friend, or Mentor may personify the principles for which Athena was the patron: wisdom (particularly strategizing intelligence), defense and guardianship of the city-state, and useful crafts.

In the 17th-century novel, *Les Aventures de Telemaque* by Fenelon, Athena, disguised as Mentor, is a prominent character as Telemachus' protector and advisor on exotic travels in training for his kingship. That novel's popularity contributed to our common use of Mentor's name.

Forgetting the origin of Mentor is a prime example of how we can lose the numinous depth of a word when we lose its original reference. The protégé of a mentor has sometimes even been called a "mentee." Appreciation of the original meanings of Mentor can enhance the experience of "mentoring" for the counselor and protégé.

When we come upon our Mentor on our life's *Odyssey*, we may be meeting both an elder guide and an exemplar of the crafts, wisdom, and guardianship of civilized society. In turn, the classic tradition of "mentoring" involves generous guidance of one's protégé toward personal accomplishments, career skills, and civic responsibility.

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