**The Importance of Being a Mentor**

*Imagine a father who is called to war. He will be away from his family, his son—he will not be there to guide the boy through the trials and tribulations of growing up. This man has a conflict of duty: he must fulfill his service to his country, but he must also be a father to his son. He knows his son will need the guiding wisdom of experience in the coming years, so he asks his close friend to look over his family, especially his son, while he is away at war.*

*Imagine this son, now a young man, watching his friends celebrate their fathers’ return from war, yet receiving no word of his own father.* Missing in action*, he is told. This young man has grown up with stories of his father, from his mother and from his father’s friend, and he must resolve a conflict in his heart: will he search for answers about his father, or will he embrace a future without him? He is at an impasse. He cannot move without knowing what has happened to his father, yet he has no idea where to begin this search.*

*This is when the family friend is needed most. He must help the young man navigate the world to find what he is looking for—even if that knowledge may be painful. He must stand beside the young man at every decision, at every encounter. He is not a leader, he is not a father, yet he must take this role just as seriously.*

*This trusted family friend, this advisor, counselor, guide is Mentor.*

*Perhaps you thought I was speaking about an Iraqi War veteran and his son. The story above is as common today as it was over two millennia ago when Homer composed the epic poem* The Odyssey*. The boy/young man is Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, and he is guided through the early years of his life by Mentor. But Mentor is no ordinary man. He is in actuality Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Mentor-Athena knows the fate of Odysseus, but (s)he knows that life is its own “odyssey,” that Telemachus must learn how to maneuver through it:*

*How to prepare for this journey.*

*How to deal with adversity.*

*How to approach those in authority.*

*How to be gracious with disappointment.*

*How to find hope in that disappointment.*

*…and finally…*

*How to handle success with dignity.*

*What we mere mortals can take away from this story is an epic lesson:*

Mentoring is a holy duty.

*It is so important that the Goddess of Wisdom personally takes an active role in the shaping of the young man Telemachus.*

*Even the name Mentor, the word itself, has special properties, as if Athena knew it would come to have important significance to the world. It is derived from the Greek word* méntos *“intent, purpose, spirit, passion,” a derivative of* ménos *“fighting spirit.” Athena knew Telemachus would be disappointed with the hard lessons to be learned in his young life, so as his mentor, she had to be his coach, a guide at his side, and not necessarily a sage on the stage, so to speak. Young people don’t need others talking at them; they need a companion to remind them of that fighting spirit in times of disappointment. Navigating the world is replete with adversity and blunders; a mentor is there to remind that youngster of intent and purpose, how to get around obstacles—for there will be many—and how to learn from them, how to grow to be stronger and a little wiser. But the word mentor has an even deeper meaning. Its roots dig into one of the oldest languages of humanity. The word came to the Greeks through Sanskrit:* man-tar *“one who thinks.” A mentor is one who thinks for a young person. What are the possibilities? Wisdom is not simply knowing an answer, a direction…it is using experience to temper knowledge, to explore all possibilities to find the optimal answer, direction.*

So what does it mean to be a mentor today?

As mentors, we have a responsibility to lead, guide, teach, and to show patience and understanding towards mentees. We need to take the time to build a trusting relationship so that the mentee feels comfortable with constructive criticism. That means we have to distinguish between constructive criticism and negative criticism, as one can build confidence and the other destroy it. As a mentor, we must be a confidence builder.

For those of us who are mentors…and those thinking of becoming mentors, we must be gracious and encouraging in our teaching. Take pride in someone learning from you. Do not be afraid to teach someone what you know about your job, as there is no greater flattery than someone imitating you. Use the wisdom of your experience to help someone become better. Share your career ups *and* downs so that the mentee can avoid pitfalls and common mistakes. Make sure that if you make a commitment to be a mentor that you put time aside to give to the relationship.

It is our professional duty to teach and pass on what we know so that good work can be continued in the future. We should all strive to be a mentor and have *intent, purpose, spirit and passion* in discharging our duties.