

# The legacy of Mentor

The protégés of today are the mentors of tomorrow.” ~ Marilynne Miles Gray

THIS SERIES IS IN SIX PARTS CONTAINING FOUR LESSONS ON COLLABORATION.

## PART 1 - THE BEGINNINGS

Why look to the past, for any contemporary lessons?

Because good leaders and good learners don't ignore history, History has the ability to make us wise. In mentoring terms, wisdom is based on past experience. If you can't live with this basic mentoring concept, you've got problems. We triangulate between past lessons, current conditions and future possibilities

An incredible amount can be learned about human nature by a backward glance. That's where the story always begins — with people.

Homer's epic comes out of the Bronze Age (3000 B.C.) as one of the first clearly-recorded instances of mentoring in Western literature. The story has been passed by word of mouth probably with little alteration down to Homer, a bard who lived some 500 years after the fall of Troy about the same time as the Exodus. Archeology has, in part, proven that the ancient Greeks were right in treating Homer's saga as real history and Homeric-sounding phrases on a clay tablet from the period of the siege of Troy give credence to the idea that there may have been an actual mentor-figure around whom events are fashioned.



## READING THE PAST

Two hundred years from now, people will have difficulties interpreting our actions and words unless they look at our motives, events and societal norms. Everything must be put in context. In ancient times, leadership was at a premium in an under-populated world in which the average life span was 35 years. Collaboration was the name of the game. No one could afford premature loss of a leader nor could anyone afford to throw away key lessons the leader had learned.

This then is **LESSON #1**: mentoring is a key and natural means to collaborate and ensure that rule by the most suitable is more likely than if left to chance.

Fully fifty percent of the Odyssey is about Mentor and his protégé (Telemachus), not about Odysseus (or Ulysses as he is also called). The first lines of the epic are about Telemachus. It's important however to set the context of the story for we learn much about mentoring just by spending a few moments getting settled in with these surprisingly modern ancestors. First, let's look at a cast of four characters: Odysseus, Mentor, Telemachus and Athene.

## ODYSSEUS



Under our microscope, Odysseus turns out to be a small time, scrappy chieftain overseeing a minuscule territory and wealth (mostly sheep and goats), striving with rivals for increased prestige and assurance that his kingdom will survive. His gift is for turning phrases and situations to his own advantage. Homer sketches a physically somewhat oafish leader endowed with great stamina. Ingenious, wily — these more than any other qualities are mentioned. When readers pick up on descriptors like *arrogant*, *grasping* and *grudge-bearing*, they scarcely seem like labels we'd want associated with the mentoring today. For readers familiar with the movie *Wall Street*, the lead character,

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Gordon Gecko, seems a good parallel. Then we recall that Odysseus is not the mentor for he plays the absent father-figure who would have, under other circumstances, have been the mentor.

To set the scene: Odysseus entrusts the education of his son, Telemachus, to Mentor. Think of it the way you would a family-run company always at peril of a hostile takeover and you get the idea of what's happening. In this case, the firm is a kingdom and the CEO is royalty. There's everything to be lost with a wrong choice whether it's weapons, staffing, or strategy.

Extremely suspicious of strangers, Odysseus is almost as mistrustful of men he had known long. Above all, he never lost sight of his own narrow self-interest. In Homer's day, these qualities were admirable and understandable particularly in a rough-and-tumble world. Odysseus would have desired certain training for a successor and for this training to be done only by the most trustworthy of people. Naturally, a successor and his instructor would be taken from inside the family and not outside if at all possible.

## MENTOR

In ancient Greece, a young boy from the upper classes usually was educated within the family or clan structure by his father and close relatives for seven to fourteen years — similar to home schooling of today. Following an initial education by the mother, starting at the age of seven, more formal instruction emphasized Greek social values and leadership more than intellect, speaking ability, athletics, or academics. Given this set of guidelines, the goddess of war and wisdom, Athena, in the guise of Mentor, assists Telemachus not so much in his search for Odysseus as she serves in a variety of roles as father figure / role model, trusted adviser, confidante, educator and protector.

One suggested root of Mentor's name comes from the word "men" or "to remember, think or counsel." The task of this person was to "remember" on behalf of the tribe and to tell the tribal stories. Freed up as we are today from this role by computers and highly technical infrastructure, for instance, this tribal role has withered, and perhaps not all for the good. On the surface, Mentor represents the "professional" or "classroom" side of Telemachus' life. He skill-builds widely during the various adventures and temptations that Telemachus faces. To us, this is very much an *ad hoc* process but to people of that period, perfectly logical and reasonable and understandable a process.

More importantly, Mentor is the still, quiet, inner voice of experience that we need to hear in moments of stress so we don't fall back into bad habits or poor response patterns. While Ulysses represents the adventuring, warring, brave, masculine spirit roaming outward to the world beyond for new ideas, Mentor is the introspective, judicious, feminine quality (Athene) looking homeward to ensure the continuity of the hearth, community and family are secured. Many qualities are needed in a balanced fashion to maintain relationships both at home and abroad.

## TELEMACHUS

Homer seems to have made certain this 20-something is a role model for the ideal king-in-waiting. The name appears to break down into 'tele' meaning "across" and "machus" meaning "the distance". In sum it means: "*I get the message*". I call this being receptive and acting on the lessons or ***The Telemachus Effect***.

Now, I have to add that the second half of *The Odyssey* especially is a handbook on leadership development. It may be that Homer and his contemporaries know full well that leadership development has many facets and can never depend on just one source, one person or mentor. That's why, in the story there is more than one mentor to ensure the reader grasps that Telemachus gets wisdom from a number of sources (the goddess Athene, Mentor, Mentos, Menelaus, Nestor and others).



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## ATHENE

Athena's name derives from the ancient Sanskrit word "Dahana" or "ahana" meaning "the light of daybreak, to wake, to know." It would be nice to think that the English word, "aha" which can mean "now I see" or "now I understand" came from the same root. Ahana became associated with the illuminating and knowledge-bringing light of the sky. The Romans called her Minerva connecting the name to the Greek word "mens" for "to think" -- from which we derive the English word "mentor", "mind" and "mental."

She more than anyone spoke wisdom to Telemachus. Athene embodied a huge mixture of qualities and capabilities. On the one hand, she was inviolate nature, and wisdom. On the other, she was creator of the plough, the trumpet, and all women's arts. As Justice, she always showed mercy and had no need to bear weapon in times of peace.

Her wisdom ensured she always won in war. Why bear arms if such wisdom? There are several explanations that speak to us thousands of year later: one had to fight to gain wisdom; ignorance was "bound" and had to be freed; fighting ignorance was like fighting a war; war in those days wasn't capricious and required more than arms but also required insight and strategy and those are based on wise experience.



IN PART 2 OF THE LEGACY,  
WE REVEAL THE NEXT BEND IN THE ROAD