

In moments like these, we need mentors

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The young man's home is besieged by rude, crude, older men all trying to marry his mother, who is locked in her room. His father has been abroad for 20 years. His mother's suitors pillage his home and insult him. He protests, but no one listens. He's not confident and he's inexperienced. Who can help?

This is the mythical story of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus.

The goddess Athena takes the form of Mentor, an old man of Ithaca, to assist Telemachus. Mentor urges Telemachus to go abroad to find news of his father; to seek the counsel of kings and soldiers - an act of intelligence and insight that enhances the boy's independent spirit.

His name has passed from ancient Greece to us, yet mentors can be all too rare at work. Many people enter adulthood without any guidance in private life. Younger workers may miss out because of short-term contracts, high staff turnover or competition for advancement. And professional mentoring can easily decline into formalised, cynical or clumsy networking.

At best, mentors are vital for development - particularly in families like Telemachus's, where parents cannot help. They stop us from squandering our gifts and impoverishing our minds. The word is important because it reminds us of the mentor's distinctive role: not simply teacher, role model or friend, but something singular.

The job of a teacher is chiefly to relay information; to teach skills, or pass on facts. The best teachers do more than this, and even to achieve the basics they need to be aware of the student's character; to adjust lessons and goals to the vicissitudes of a child's psyche. But one can be a good teacher to a class of students, and mentor to none.

Neither is a role model a mentor. Role models are exemplars - they represent, and they possess, the virtues we want to embody. But they can do this at a distance, and unknowingly - Odysseus was a role model for his faraway son. When I was 12, the fictional Sherlock Holmes was a role model for me (his use of cocaine notwithstanding). But neither was a mentor, because they were never there to praise, provoke, reproach. Mentoring requires proximity and intimacy.

And a mentor is not necessarily a friend. Friends are crucial for a good life, for shared joys, caring advice and moral support. But even our closest, most trusted friends cannot always mentor us. They often lack that first, vital trait of the mentor: experience.

When Athena chose to help Telemachus, her choice of an elder was no coincidence. Refined with intelligence and discrimination, age gives experience: subtle, intuitive knowledge; a "feel" for situations, and the actions they demand. Experience gives a richer consciousness: life's shortfalls and exaltations have left their mark on the mentor's mind. Their nudges, censures and suggestions help their proteges to find their own celebrations and scars.

Mentors need another virtue: honesty. They don't always console or comfort their protege - they confront them with blunt reality. When Telemachus doubted Athena's assistance, she angrily rebuked him, "her eyes afire". In one of his mentoring moments, my doctoral supervisor capped off one of my conference papers with a quiet "get off the stage before they see the holes in your arguments". What seemed like a thoughtless insult was a call for reflection: don't be smugly confident just because you got a little applause.

And a mentor must be generous. One of our most dull, fruitless catch cries is that of generational conflict. Of course this happens, particularly as older workers retire later. But many of the finest professionals or citizens - those of strength, passion and talent - are also the most generous: sacrificing time and energy for a promising protege. They see this not as career suicide, but as the betterment of their own profession or society.

The job of the mentor is a strange one: not simply offering skills, companionship, or an ideal self. The mentor is an authoritative guide, using worldly wisdom to encourage maturation. They help the protege enrich, clarify and hone their consciousness; they juggle hard reality and gleaming possibility.

Mentoring can be as simple as a slap on the back or mild mockery, or a punch in the face. A weekly coffee can do more than a corporate mentoring program. And we needn't be gods to do it: just ordinary mortals with a stake in the future.

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