**Youth Initiated Mentoring**

By Dr. Jean Rhodes

Books and articles about mentoring often begin with a brief nod to Homer’s epic poem, *The Odyssey*, to explain the etymology of the term. In it, the legendary Greek king, Odysseus, asks his friend, Mentor, to watch over his household and son, Telemachus, before leaving to fight in the Trojan War. The field of mentoring is a living tribute to this old friend, the personification of the protective, guiding, and supportive figures that we all deserve. This ancient myth neatly encapsulates our visions of the ideal intergenerational relationship and has helped to unify the thousands of programs as well as the eponymous organization, MENTOR, around common goals. A closer read of the poem, however, suggests that this field might have just as logically been named shepherd, seagull, ship captain’s daughter, or swallow, all of which were forms that the Greek goddess Athena inhabited to dispense her wisdom. Granted, Athena’s first appearance was that of “a Taphian chieftain named Mentes,” but Mentor was still by no means a major figure in this epic poem and provided very little in the way of support, protection, advice, or counsel to young Telemachus. In fact, Mentor allowed Odysseus’ household to sink into ruin and be overrun with unwanted suitors who bullied Telemachus and harassed his mother, Penelope. This is a far cry from the image of a wise and nurturing advisor.

We owe our archetypal notions of Mentor not to Homer’s *Odyssey*, but to one of the most popular and subversive books of the 17th Century, the *Les aventures de Telemaque* (1699), a French novel by the Fenelon, Archbishop of Cambrai and tutor to the Duke of Burgundy, who was the grandson of Louis XIV. In recounting the original poem to his royal pupil, Fenelon took a fan-fiction writer’s creative liberty, spinning it into a new tale of the educational travels of Telemachus and his tutor, Mentor. In doing so, the reframed novel became a scathing rebuke of the autocratic reign of the King, the excesses of wealth, and royal preferences for luxury at the expense of the everyday laborers. This reframing may help to account for both its enormous popularity and Fenelon’s banishment from the Court of Versailles. And, as Historian Andy Roberts (1999) and other scholars have argued, it was this book that precipitated the popular use of the term “mentor” to describe a caring, older adult. Indeed, although there had been no mention of the term “mentor” in the previous centuries, it came into common usage in the decades following the publication of this book. As Roberts (1999) notes, “It is thanks to Fenelon, and the ‘age of enlightenment,’ that the modern-day allusions of the word mentor were brought into the language at all. It is thanks to Fenelon that the term mentor was resurrected from circa 1000 b.c. and brought into the language circa 1750 a.d., thus filling a gap of some three millennia... It is Fenelon’s Mentor, not Homer’s, that should be referred to when considering the popular environmental connotations that the word mentor now implies. Any reading of *The Odyssey* will not find such rich references to the character Mentor that counsels, guides, nurtures, advises and enables.”

It is perhaps fitting that our collective understanding of Mentor was built on a foundation of mythology and misunderstanding. It is also quite remarkable that so many of us tacitly accepted this mythical origin story when evidence to the contrary required little more than a cursory read of the ancient poem. In much the same way, the disappointing verdicts on mentoring effectiveness that have been compiled in this book have been hiding in plain sight for decades. Yet misguided assumptions, high hopes, and confirmation biases prevented many constituents, myself included, from fully internalizing their lessons and making the necessary corrections.

# Fenelon’s twist notwithstanding, *The Odyssey* does, however, impart some valuable lessons about mentoring. First, there is the issue of Mentor’s fallibility. Mentor himself may not have lived up to his mythology but, in his mortal imperfections, comes an appreciation of and patience for the complexities of the role. Unrealistic expectations for what mentors and programs can and should deliver have intimidated potential volunteers while minimizing the contributions of the many, everyday caring adults and program staff who, collectively, play a role in supporting youth development.

# Moreover, by assuming so many different roles, Athena seemed to intuit that a single tree cannot possibly shade a child’s path to adulthood. In his book *Survival Math,* Mitchell S. Jackson writes about the many mentors who helped him to navigate the complexities of black life*,* “I had a father because I made one, or rather I composed a father from the men at hand, brothers who kept me long before Obama made it a project.” This composite included his grandfather, an uncle, and a former high school coach, each of whom had qualities that Jackson tried to emulate. Indeed, many of us have been shaped by several caring adults, from professional providers and formal mentors to the caring adults in our everyday lives. And finally, Fenelon’s critiques of wealth concentration and his calls for economic justice remain as relevant today as they did under Louis XIV.

# In a special issue of the *Journal of Primary Prevention* devoted to my mentor, George Albee, the editors wrote that, “George's way of helping people to develop is to invite them to ’come along.’ ... to walk with him in his path and to see the world through his lenses: a world free from exploitation and domination of one group by another, a world in which each person has the freedom and the resources to develop her or his potential to the fullest, a world in which the highest goal would be one person's concern and regard for others. As always, with George's invitation comes the unwritten command to fight the good fight…with energy, commitment, and enthusiasm.” It is my hope that, with a renewed resolve, you will be fighting the good fight to ensure a more promising future for all youth.

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