Spotlight: The Prototype and Paradox of Mentorship

By Tyler Fisher

Mentor is one of those rare words that is identical across many languages. In English, German, Spanish, French, Welsh, Swedish, Polish, Croatian, among others, it remains invariable. This unusual consistency reflects a common origin: the word derives from a source predating the various languages in which it appears.

In Greek, the word is ἔντυμος, etymology means “true, authentic, essential” — the quintessence of a thing. Etymology is a quest for the deep, primordial foundations of a word, a rededication of intrinsic truths. Such is the case with mentor.

"Mentor" is the name of a minor yet pivotal character in Homer’s Odyssey. When Odysseus leaves home for the Trojan War, he appoints his old friend Mentor to be the guardian of his sons and counsellor to his son, Telemachus. Mentor serves in these capacities throughout the ten-year war and Odysseus’ ten-year journey home to Ithaca, and he turns up at crucial junctions in the epic to advise young Telemachus. But all is not as it seems. When Mentor appears in the Odyssey, he is, in fact, the goddess Athena in disguise. The goddess of war and wisdom, disguised as the aged caretaker, counsels Telemachus, inspires him to undertake his own voyage, leads an assault on the preposterous suitors, and, in the very last line of the epic, breaks peace among warring factions in Ithaca.

From this ancient antecedent of mentor, we can draw intriguing perspectives for our present understanding of mentorship. These perspectives can be expressed as five paradoxes, seeming contradictions held in tension. A veritable package of apparent paradoxes, the most effective mentors are approachable yet transcendent, accidental by design, direct to indirect, apodictic yet steady, and individually yet expansively.

When I reflect on my undergraduate experience at UCF, I recognize a host of faculty mentors. My appreciation for their mentorship has only grown over the years, especially in light of the competing demands on faculty members’ time. One mentor in particular, Dr. Barry Mauer, exemplifies the traits I’ve drawn from the Homeric wellspring of the word.

Dr. Mauer is, in my view, an accessible, soft-spoken, self-effacing professor who put my freshman nerves at ease and, at the same time, inspired awe. His demeanor welcomed dialogues, and dialogues with Dr. Mauer prompted me to reimagine everyday assumptions. For instance, he once observed, “When people lose digital objects, they go through similar stages of grief, on a lesser scale, as when losing a loved one. What might a memorial or monument to lost data look like?” In a course on propaganda, he assigned a chapter on how to start a cult. I might not see them for months at a time, but their enduring influence continues to shape my ideas, and I know that I can turn to them for collaborative inquiry and seasoned perspectives.

In Dr. Mauer’s mentorship, I found a caring and approachable other who let me collaborate on his research projects. Early on, I had the chance to draft a taxonomy of radical storytelling. From that thought-provoking task, I developed my first viable question for research: Are there discernable natural differences in the way people recount stories of personal experiences at the location where the events took place as opposed to off-location? My mentor made the question my own, and the possible answers were wonderfully open, mine to discover.

As an example of a mentor, we can draw invigorating perspectives for our present understanding of mentorship. These perspectives can be expressed as five paradoxes. An approachable yet transcendent, accidental by design, direct to indirect, apodictic yet steady, and individually yet expansively. These perspectives can be expressed as five paradoxes, seeming contradictions held in tension. A veritable package of apparent paradoxes, the most effective mentors are approachable yet transcendent, accidental by design, direct to indirect, apodictic yet steady, and individually yet expansively.