

The Joy of Mentoring – Vogue, September 2010, Kathryn Heyman

She's waiting in the corner of the cafe, head down, scribbling notes in the corner of the page, the picture of creative industry as the Glebe traffic hums past. We order coffee, pull out pens, and dive into her writing. We meet each month, and each month, I'm more excited by what I read. I'm not her editor, and I am not her teacher. She is a blossoming writer, and I am her mentor. Each month, she sends me several chapters of her novel-in-progress. Several days later, we meet and – amidst much laughter – we talk through what she's written. Sometimes, she is stuck for what to do next. On those days, we pull out index cards, write down chapter titles, shuffle them around, discuss and debate. We talk about her fictional characters intently, moving them from place to place. In that hour or so in the cafe, they are real people. When she leaves, she will be alone with them again. Some months, I take the role of an editor – other months, I am a cheerleader, calling her on to the glorious end that I can see. I can see it and believe it because I have been in her chair. I've been the one struggling to believe that I can complete that first book, or that anyone will care if I do. My role is to pass on my experience and hope that she can learn from my mistakes as well as my successes. It's an ancient practice, dating back to the ancient Greeks and to the very first mentor.

In Homer's classic tale *The Odyssey*, King Odysseus has left his son, Telemachus, in Ithaca while he has spent years fighting the Trojan War and more years trying to return. So who will young Telemachus find as his role model? In the absence of his father, who will help him navigate the treacherous path to manhood? Telemachus has a gap in his life, and he needs a wise man – a father figure – to fill it. Ladies and Gentlemen, a round of applause for the Ithacan elder of the moment, Mentor. As a wise elder, a trusted friend, Mentor takes up the role of guide for Telemachus. Still, Mentor isn't man enough. At a crucial moment in the narrative, the goddess Athene disguises herself

as Mentor and steps in to give some crucial advice to the young prince. Go and ask King Nestor for some information, she says. Telemachus panics. What will I say? He asks. Then, according to Homer, “the goddess, grey-eyed Athene, encouraged him; the right words, she said, would come.” Athene, in disguise as Mentor, does not instruct Telemachus. She doesn't give him the words. She doesn't hand him a script. She simply points him to his own wisdom and reminds him of the skills which he has been taught by Mentor.

The moment Athene disguises herself in this way, Mentor is no longer a person, but a *role*. A role, Homer seems to suggest, that is as much about cheerleading, about moral support, as instruction or transferring knowledge. I imagine Athene shouting, “You go, boyfriend!” as Telemachus nervously approaches one of his heroes. In working with Athene as his mentor, Telemachus doesn't want to become like Athene. Instead he understands that he needs help to become a better version of *himself*.

We all do. In a world of increasing isolation, where traditional, informal connections have often broken down, mentoring is increasingly acknowledged as necessary. Without the wide network of elders and guides that may have existed in ancient times, we are increasingly needing to find more formal ways of finding the support we need to become the best versions of ourselves. That's the role of the mentor, the calling you on to your own excellence. The screenwriter and director Rachel Ward is someone who knows a thing or two about excellence. She also knows a thing or two about mentoring, from both sides of the table. As the patron for the organisation Aunties and Uncles, Ward promotes a kind of 'life mentoring' – the sort that the original Mentor offered to Telemachus, the troubled teen. Over more than a decade, Ward committed to sharing monthly weekends with her 'niece and nephews', three children who shared parts of her family life and observed Ward making and modelling life choices. It was of mutual benefit, she says, bringing a wider connectedness and

perspective to her life. “I never think of myself as being able to offer wisdom, but as you age, you collect experiences. This, mentoring, is one of the fields where we can really retain a usefulness.” There are, she says, “So many choices in life, and so many paths you can take. It's so much easier if someone can say: Here try this route, it worked for me. You're simply helping to take a bit of the fear out of life.”

Ward made the shift from actor to writer/director by the timeless route of hard slog and humble learning, taking up a postgraduate writing degree and crafting intelligent, award-winning short films. It was after she wrote and directed her debut feature, the luminous *Beautiful Kate*, that Ward spent some time being mentored on her follow-up project by the screenwriting guru Stephen Cleary. In spite of building up quite a screen profile, Ward was, crucially, willing to learn. As she says, “There's always someone who knows more than you in different areas. None of us have all of the wisdom all of the time. I don't want to ever feel that I'm too finished or polished to learn from someone else.”

The Greek philosopher Aristotle observed three forms of knowledge: *techne*, practical skill; *episteme*, intellectual knowledge; and *phronesis*, perhaps most closely described as practical wisdom. It is a balance of craft or technical skills with deep knowledge that leads to this deepest form of wisdom. That's what mentoring aims for. Let's say you're trying to write your first novel, or a memoir. You tap away at the keyboard, with only the sound of your own breath to keep you company, and every so often you read the words out to your writing group over cups of tea. They adore it. You're brilliant, they glow. Yet, you know the book isn't ready, that something is missing. You can almost imagine it, can almost see yourself standing with the published book in your hands. If only you could get from here to there. But how? Or, you're a female Accounts Director. You know you have the determination and the instinct to make it to the corner office. But you have no idea how to negotiate your way through the maze of testosterone that almost knocks you out every time

you enter the board room. Or perhaps you are an emerging artist who wants to master the skills associated with an ancient form of glazing, centuries old, passed down from master to master. You can sense it isn't quite enough merely to practice these skills in isolation. You know there is something more to becoming a true artist, but what? A mentor takes on the role of practised guide, passing on the practical wisdom that they've acquired through thousands of hours of flying time. Mentors don't necessarily offer intellectual knowledge of critical work, though they may. Nor do they instruct in the detailed technical capabilities of craftwork, though they may. What mentorship offers, above all, is this practical wisdom, this *phronesis*, which may well be unavailable by other means.

Mentoring assumes that there is a gap between where you are and where you want to be. In that way, it's similar to therapy, or teaching. Unlike therapy, though, in mentoring there is an assumption that the mentee can see what's on the other side of the gap. *I want to be a successful screenwriter. I want to publish a novel. I want to run my own company.* Mentoring is aspirational, in that it acknowledges a desire to move forward. It's a model of learning which works for teenagers and octogenarians, for creatives and corporates alike.

Jane Smith, Head of the Screenwriting Centre at the Australian Film Television and Radio School has, like Ward, experienced mentoring from both sides, and is such a believer in the process that she made a mentoring programme a centrepiece of the school's Graduate Diploma in Screenwriting. Formerly CEO of the NSW Film and Television Office and vice president of Hugh Jackman's company Seed Productions, Smith was always clear that mentoring was a crucial part of the creative, as well as the corporate process. "The screen development programmes I'd designed at the Film and Television Office all relied on some kind of mentoring. It is a great way of tailoring the "learning" to a particular person and project. This also accelerates the progress."

Smith discovered early on in her corporate career the importance of being mentored by senior women. “They provided me with a road map to manage the world I was in and eventually flourish. It's exciting for me to be able to pass those skills on.” That's a sentiment echoed by Rachel Ward: “To be in a position to be able to give something back in this way, it's a pleasure and a privilege.”

I couldn't agree more. Last week I had an invitation from a former mentee, Jane Rusbridge, to the launch of her second novel, *Rook*, published with great fanfare in London by Bloomsbury. I held the invite in my hands and understood, for a moment, how Athene must have felt cheering Telemachus on to his best, true self. A pleasure and a privilege indeed.