

# MYTHIC MENTORING<sup>1</sup>

by

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## ForeWords

Academic research mentoring by a faculty principal investigator of a research grant of one of his or her graduate student thesis researchers is less like the academic advising session of an advisor and an advisee or the consulting office hour of a teacher and a student than the intersection of two career directions or mythic pathways of destiny. In mythology, destiny is distinguished from fate insofar as the latter is deterministic. Accordingly, I shall first discuss mythic pathways of destiny or Ways, and I shall second discuss mentoring in the categories of these Ways. (Broome 1996)

## Mythic Ways of Destiny

When one can feel oneself in relation to the universe in the same complete and natural way as that of the child with the mother, one is in complete harmony and tune with the universe. Getting into harmony and tune with the universe and staying there is the principal function of mythology. (Campbell 1990)

In the period 1964-86 Noam Chomsky revolutionized linguistics with his idea that all human beings have the same capacity for the same grammatical rules underlying all languages, and that this capacity is in-born, i.e. “hard-wired,” so to speak, in the brain from birth. In *Acts of Meaning* (1990) Jerome Semour Bruner suggested that human beings have a capacity for narrative that is hard-wired in the brain from birth. This is to say that humans have a “readiness for narrative,” an inclination to order experience as a story, i.e. to think in terms of story elements: point of view, plot, setting, etc. (McAdams 1999; Winston & Kittles, 2005) In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1973), Joseph Campbell discusses mankind’s great mythic stories.

Around 3,000 BC Menes the Fighter unified the warrior-herder tribes in Upper Egypt and the urban-agrarian communities in Lower Egypt to form the great civilization of Ancient Egypt. Carved around 1500 BC, Egyptian steles depicted the Sacred Triad, respectively, Horus, Osiris, and Isis. These Gods personified, respectively, Pharaoh, ordinary Egyptian citizen and High Priestess in Egyptian myth. As Horus is the son of Osiris and Isis, stories of their family life, military exploits and politics have since been preserved in

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Egyptian mythology. This Triad served as a model for the social orders of family, community, workplace and nation. A mathematician would say the social order is a fractal. By 325 AD Emperor Constantine the Great had reunified the Roman Empire and made Christianity its state religion. Christian leaders brought with them their concept of the *Holy Trinity*: God the Father; God the Son; and God the Holy Spirit. And they brought their holy books containing stories of how these facets of God interacted with one another as well as with others. Like the *Sacred Triad*, the *Holy Trinity* served as a model for the social orders of family, community, workplace and Empire, i.e. a fractal order.

Around 1200 BC Moses ascended Mount Sinai. He is King of the Hebrews and his brother Aaron is High Priest. After his return with the *Ten Commandments* he deposes Aaron and becomes both King and High Priest. Stone reliefs of two nearly asymmetrical carved figures of King Ashurnasirpal II (883 – 859 BC) facing the tree of life once prominently appeared in Assyria. One figure is in regal attire; the other, priestly attire. The King is a High Priest. In 1534, King Henry VIII was excommunicated from the Church of Rome and became head of the Church of England. Perhaps the earliest version of the King-High Priest took the form of a marriage between King and High Priestess as represented in Myth by the sacred triad of Osiris and Isis. At what cost is the King-High Priest arrangement?

On the one hand, if the separation of King and High Priest should survive some modicum of conflicts, these conflicts may inspire a society to meet new challenges with flexibility and creativity. On the other hand, the merger of King and High Priest may produce harmony, but at the cost of rigidity. Over time, cultural rigidity reduces many duties of the King-High Priest down to finished systems which become ritualized into traditions. Measurably unburdened, the King-High Priest acknowledges the Tradition Keeper: the Hausa of Nigeria have their *Mutumun Kirki* or Man of Good Character, Native Americans have their Storyteller, the Chinese have their venerable ones, and others have the Shaman and Witch Doctor.

Mythic stories tell of heroes in the Popular Way of life who are ordinary members of society as opposed to leaders. The Popular hero is concerned about pursuits of self-interests. Socrates distinguished between life and a life worth living, and put a life worth living on his list of primary goods. He said that the ill-considered life is not worth living and thus committed suicide rather than be forced to live it. A legacy of his choice is academic freedom and the claim today that the anti-intellectual life is not worth living. Other exemplars include Horus, God the Son, Cordelia (Act I), Telemachus, and Rosa Parks.

Mythic stories tell of heroes in the Priestly Way (Campbell 1973). Lucien Levy-Bruhl and C.G. Jung would say these heroes are leaders experienced in the *participation mystique* (Jung 1962). In *The Oberlin Horse* (Broome 1996), Irene was the mother of her family which had two children and who extended it by six orphans. Then, she symbolically killed her former self, namely, “mother of two,” so as to become “mother of all,” albeit over the protests of her eldest child. Thus, as Penelope kept Ithaca intact while Odysseus was on adventure, Irene kept her new family intact while three of her brothers were on quests for higher education and who would return to inspire others to do

likewise. Other exemplars include Isis, God the Holy Spirit, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, Jr. Guinevere was a hero: at first, Priestly; at last, Popular. Mythic stories tell of heroes in the Regal Way who are dragon-slaying, grail-quest ideals of Kings (Campbell 1990). The Regal Way corresponds to Joseph Campbell's Individual Way. Exemplars include Osiris, God the Father, Cordelia (Act V), Parzival and Nelson Mandela.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow men. (Campbell 1990)

The story begins with the hero situated in the realm of the collective consciousness of a society which is suffering a problem, and the hero hears a call to come to the rescue by seeking out the Holy Grail containing the remedy to the problem, and bringing it back for everyone to share.

The journey begins with the separation. Then the hero's adventure begins as he penetrates the collective twilight state of society and ventures *down* into its *dark* collective unconscious. There he finds the Holy Grail: he discovers that the Grail contains fearful truths contingent to society's problem; but it lies in the custody of a fierce dragon. Nevertheless, the hero risks his life to wrest the Grail from the dragon. When he gets it, he passes again through the twilight state on the way back to consciousness. The hero's return is celebrated by society.

From a Freudian point of view, Campbell says, the function of the hero's journey is to help individuals in the first half of their lives develop out of adolescence and into mature adulthood, and continue their development through mature adulthood. Like Oedipus, the Freudian hero is in pursuit of a job and a mate. The second half of life is old age. Odysseus had a job and a mate but was seeking the meaning of life. The goal of the myth is the strong ego, one enabling the individual to resist parents and instincts alike. "Lingering attachments to parents for the satisfaction of instincts or to satisfy instincts in antisocial ways is to be stuck, or fixated, at adolescence." (Campbell 1973)

### **Mythic Mentoring**

The German model of a research university is characterized, in part, by its requirements for a doctoral dissertation. Specifically, the doctoral student is required to publish an academic work. The courses he signs up for, and the segments of those courses he saw fit to attend, were his choices. He visits his mentor rarely. Today, in the USA, some academic mentors collaborate with their research students mainly to agree on a research topic and funding support. While visitations by the student to the mentor are rare, consultations on publication, preparation and submission, and research grant reports and new proposals are welcomed by the mentor. Accordingly, the mentor's pathway and the protégé's pathway are highly independent Popular Ways in their collaboration.

In the monastic tradition, researchers were committed to do research in the service of God's will as handed down to them by their clerical superiors. Today, in the USA, some

academic mentors follow a version of the monastic tradition with a cooperative style. Mentor and protégé work together, often as equals. Accordingly, the mentor's pathway and the protégé's pathway are highly dependent Priestly Ways in their collaboration.

In 1500 AD there were about seventy universities in Europe. (Ross 1976) The Italian universities were institutes of medicine, law, government, etc., and the students were apprentices, more or less, of their professors. Today, in the USA, some academic mentors manage the day-to-day progress of the dissertations of their doctoral student protégés. Accordingly, the mentor's pathway in this collaboration is the Regal Way and the protégé's pathway is Popular much as the pathway of Telemachus in his relationship with the returned Odysseus.

The mentor may see his role in a mentoring relationship as that of an academic sage. This role is defined by reference to seniority, wisdom, institutional memory, or survivorship. The sagacious mentor may be randomly available for consultation and tends to answer direct questions with stories. Accordingly, the mentor's pathway in this collaboration is the Way of the Keeper and the protégé's pathway is much as the Regal pathway of a mythic Grail quest hero in his relationship with his hero helper.

Once, I conducted two seminars on the above four styles of mentoring for the Graduate Students Association at a well-known university. There, I discovered stressful mentoring relationships made so by incompatibilities between the preferred styles of mentor and protégé. The stresses seemed brought on by the absence of any discussion between mentor and protégé on styles. (Broome, Gbadegesin and Winston) Then, I observed that the mentoring experience can take place not only in a single style but alternatively in a sequence of two or more styles. When centered on the protégé, the sequence is said to be developmental. When centered on the research project, it is called herein a mission.

The developmental sequence consists in three phases. (Sweeny 2003) Called Tell, the first phase is a master/apprentice (Regal/Popular) style in which the mentor engages the protégé with problems having only one right answer. Called the Sell, the second phase is a transition from the Tell to the third phase called Collaborate. Specifically, in the Sell the mentor engages the protégé with problems having situation-dependent answers (Regal-Priestly style). This stimulates the protégé to defend his choices even when they disagree with those of the mentor. In the Collaborate phase (Priestly style) the mentor and protégé become "true partners and are much more equal or peers in feeling ownership and responsibility for monitoring task accomplishment." The last phase is called Delegate. More or less a German research model (Popular style), this phase sees the mentor become "primarily a cheer leader and encourager of the protégé."

#### *A Man On a Mission*

When I started my dissertation my advisor put me into a Regal style. Having a preference for the Popular style, I asked, "When will my dissertation come to an end?" He replied, "Today I am the teacher and you are the student. This research will become your dissertation when you become the teacher and I become the student." That day came. The project had met an impasse and he told me to transcend it by method X. I

suggested Y but he relented. I did both X and Y. I presented both X and Y and demonstrated the superiority of Y to X. Then he asked, “What should we do next?” From that point on we engaged a role-reversal in the Regal style. I called the meetings and more or less lectured on my progress. The dissertation ended when I asked, “Where should we publish?” He replied, “Anywhere you like.” And I did.

### AfterWords

It is incredible that the four perhaps most familiar models of mentoring graduate research students correspond as strongly as they do to the four mythic Ways of destiny. These are Western models. The most important factoring in achieving harmony in mentoring is that the mentor and mentee discuss their preferences for mentoring styles prior to the mentoring engagement. When a person reveals a preference for style, he or she is revealing a preference for a mythic Way of destiny that betrays his or her self-identity as a mythic hero. Then, others can learn more about how to negotiate a relationship with that person by delving into the appropriate mythic stories.

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