

DRAFT COPY

New Student Convocation

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7:30 p.m.

Duke Chapel

MENTOR, A KINSMAN OF ODYSSEUS

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and
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President Brodie, Provost Griffiths, Deans of the College, Faculty
Colleagues, Members of the Class of 1989, guests and friends:

I am honored to be here this evening, and to have this opportunity to
address you at this opening convocation. The committee which selected
me to represent the faculty on this occasion has suggested that I be:

- a. scholarly - as is befitting a member of the faculty;
- b. challenging - as is befitting this special occasion; and,
- c. brief - as is befitting the capacity of the air conditioning
on a hot August night.

Let me therefore embark with these injunctions in mind.

The text from which my address is developed comes from The Odyssey by
Homer. In Book 2 of Robert Fitzgerald's translation, Odysseus' son,
Telemachus, is addressing an assembly on the plight of his mother,
Penelope, who is being besieged by suitors. It is assumed by all that
Odysseus, Telemachus' father, has been lost at sea.

Beginning at line 225 the verse reads:

Telemachus sat down in silence, next to stand was Mentor,
comrade in arms of the prince Odysseus, an old man now.
Odysseus left him authority over his house and slaves,
to guard them well.

Three figures have always fascinated me in reading The Odyssey: the
central character of Odysseus, his son Telemachus, and the old Ithacan

nobleman Mentor. The Oxford Classical Dictionary contains a lengthy commentary on Odysseus; Telemachus, the son, is treated in a somewhat more modest account, and only a brief reference is made of Mentor.

What briefly do we know about these three figures? Beginning with the father, Odysseus, we find an impressive list of accomplishments and talents:

he was the successor to the King of Ithaca;
he was an individual who was both brave and intelligent;
As a young man he was enterprising and cunning; and,
according to later Greek writers, Odysseus had a talent
for lying fluently on occasion.

Oh yes, I almost forgot -- the father was also noted for acquiring a wide circle of acquaintances ranging from hostile Cicones and seductive sirens to faithful kinsmen. One such faithful kinsman was the Ithacan nobleman Mentor.

Briefly what do we know about the son, Telemachus? Francois Fénelon, in his work The Adventures of Telemachus: Son of Odysseus published in Paris in the last century, portrays Telemachus as an untried youth, a good and dutiful son who is timid and unenterprising. Telemachus leaves in search of his father. His journey is interrupted, and he is warned to return home. Telemachus later matures into an intelligent and enterprising man, a fact which astonishes his mother. On several key occasions in his life, we know that Telemachus was visited and instructed by the Goddess Athena who was the personification of wisdom. On at least two such visitations, Athena took the form of Mentor, who was known to be an experienced and trusted counsellor. It is significant that wisdom was presented to the youth through this form.

At last I come to Mentor - the least discussed, and yet in many ways, the most intriguing, to me, of the three characters. What we know about this figure is quite limited. First, we know that the name itself comes from the root "men; mon" meaning "to remember, think, and to counsel." The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that the proper name "Mentor" may have been invented or chosen by the poet, Homer, as appropriately significant. Secondly, we know that Mentor was presented as a friend of Odysseus. Mentor was entrusted with the education of Odysseus' son - a responsibility that was neither lightly granted nor lightly accepted. Thirdly, we know that Mentor is portrayed as an experienced and trusted counsellor. A man, whom we may assume, was both wise and patient in his dealings with the youth. Fourthly, we can assume that since Mentor had authority over Odysseus' household he was also entrusted with the responsibility for Telemachus' education.

About the substance of Telemachus' education we know very little, and so we must speculate. At the time of Homer, the methods and aims of Greek education were not particularly academic. Most certainly the power of effective speech was made an object of education. For the most part, however, intellectual training of the type that Telemachus supposedly received, was limited to the use of the lyre and to singing. Dancing, wrestling, swimming and other athletic exercises were practiced, but there is no indication that there was any general teaching of them in Homer's time. Most certainly athletics would not have been one of Mentor's responsibilities.

Professor A. S. Wilkins in his commentary on Greek education contends that education's primary purpose was not to stimulate or gratify intellectual curiosity, but to develop in the future citizen the physical, mental, and moral excellence which might fit him to do good service to the state. The education in morals was important, and for this reason it was doubtless given by the father, and then mainly through the father's own example. Since Telemachus' father was often absent, we might assume that one of Mentor's functions, as an experienced counsellor, was to teach, through example, his own code of principles and conduct.

Unfortunately, we know nothing of the character of the particular relationship that must have existed between Mentor, the trusted counsellor, and Telemachus, his pupil. And yet, it is that property that has become synonymous in describing the relationship that can often exist between a special type of teacher and a special pupil.

Throughout history there have been numerous manifestations of this special type of relationship. For example, Socrates and his pupil Plato; Plato and his student Aristotle; Aristotle and his pupil Alexander the Great. These and many others in philosophy, science, and the arts attest to the power and achievement of the mentor experience.

I am reminded, by my children, that even in the futuristic fantasy world of George Lucas' Star War's Trilogy, we continue to encounter the figure of the untried youth, in this case, Luke Skywalker, and his mentors - Obiwan Kenobe and the Jedi Master, Jouda.

I suspect that a few of you in the audience have already undergone the mentor experience. Whether it was when you encountered that special teacher in high school or that trusted counsellor in your profession, each of you knows that your lives have been touched by that special relationship. While the kinds of experiences and the resulting achievements can not be enumerated here, nor can they be easily classified, there is, nevertheless a thread that runs through them all: in each case you have come into contact with an individual who has the capacity to enable.

Socrates, Plato, and even Obiwan Kenobe had this enabling talent. What is this talent? It is the skill of enabling others to make use of their abilities, abilities that they have always possessed but which they have failed to realize. I believe that this capacity to enable others is the central attribute of the mentor. The actual enabling that can occur may range from stimulating imagination, to encouraging discernment, judgment, and perspective.

Enabling, I believe, depends upon a unique kind of relationship between the enabler and the enabled. In some ways, as the Pulitzer prize winning author, John E. Mack, has suggested, enabling resembles the relation between a teacher and a student, especially where the teacher is viewed as master and the student is the novice craftsman. And yet the relation involves more than simply teaching because even in good teaching, the teacher is often simply an active giver, and the student is more or

less the passive recipient. No, No, I think that enabling is more than that! Enabling seeks more of a balance between active teaching, and active learning. Enabling is therefore more of a mutual relation, one in which both parties come to realize themselves. What I am suggesting then is that in the process of enabling, both the pupil and ultimately the mentor achieve fulfillment.

Tonight as you, the members of the class of 1989, embark upon your own intellectual odysseys, I charge each of you to find a mentor within this university. If you have carefully examined your preregistration materials, your advising leaflets, your orientation package, and your schedule, you know that nowhere in these materials has Duke University assigned you a mentor. As you have already discovered, Duke has assigned you to an almost staggering array of people within this university. You have been assigned to a FAC, a RA, an area coordinator, a faculty advisor, at least four instructional staff, and a bewildering array of deans. But no one in this university has assigned you a mentor. Why?

Is it because Duke University has no enabling talent?
Obviously not.

Is it because Duke University's enabling talent is currently in short supply like dormitory housing?

No, that is not it.

Is it because we in the university do not believe in the importance of the mentor experience?

No, because some of us have already benefited from the mentor experience and know of its importance.

Duke University does not assign you a mentor because we believe that you must discover that friend of Odysseus for yourself. Your search for that unique person will begin a time of self-examination. Your quest will take form with each experience of individual striving. Your journey will gain focus with each trial-and-error encounter with the university's faculty-scholars. And, ultimately you will find your mentor among those individuals who are willing to risk the full sharing of their energies and intellectual resources with those of you who would learn alongside them.

The process of discovering your mentor is, in many ways, like the process of character formation. It has a quality of its own, unduplicated in anyone else. I believe that the university can not shelter you from this quest. We can neither pre-empt your choice, nor the conflict that you may experience along the way. Our promise to you is not one of easy gratification, but rather one of challenge and self-actualization.

I am reminded, however, that even in the Greek classics, the heroic figures, such as Odysseus, were rarely sent on their quest without some clues to guide them along their way. Let me then, in closing, give you some suggestions for selecting your mentor after you have gone through the processes of self-examination and experimentation.

Let me suggest that you begin by narrowing your search to those faculty who have a reputation for excellence in research and excellence in teaching. As you might expect, there are many different attributes of the excellent scholar-teacher. In a recent report by the faculty of Arts and Sciences, several attributes of excellence in teaching were identified. Let me incorporate some of these into my recommendation to you:

1. First, look for those scholar teachers who have an ability to instill in you a sense of intellectual excitement and a respect for intellectual values. Such excitement and respect will act as a source of motivation during your hours of intellectual endeavor.

2. Second, search out for those individuals who have maintained a recognized mastery of the knowledge in their fields. Furthermore, be certain that this mastery of content is coupled with an ability to communicate that knowledge to you. It is only the master that can truly enable the apprentice.

3. Third, find those persons who are willing to be open and sharing with you - to make you feel that they are approachable both in and outside the classroom. Remember approachability is a cornerstone of trust.

4. Lastly, discover those who are committed to intellectual honesty in themselves and in others. The great requisite for the mentor experience is honesty. In the academic community we are about the pursuit of truth. That pursuit, however, can only occur when honesty, candor and courage can be taken for granted.

No one faculty-scholar may have all of these attributes. Neither may you find in a single individual everything you may want or need. But, unlike Telemachus, you will ultimately make your own choice as to whom will serve as your trusted guide. Make your choice thoughtfully.

Thank you, and good evening.

A. Eldridge
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