

The Zen of Mentoring: Taking the Less Traveled Path to Success

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Jeffrey Krivis (First Mediation Corporation)

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The following was written by my colleague and friend, **Mariam Zadeh**, following her transition as a 9/11 survivor to becoming a private mediator in Los Angeles:

One who refuses to seek the advice of others will eventually be led to a path of ruin. A mentor helps you to perceive your own weaknesses and confront them with courage. The bond between mentor and protégé enables us to stay true to our chosen path until the very end. [Buddhist Philosopher Daisaku Ikeda]

On September 11, 2001, the lives of many in New York were forever changed, including mine. If I had been asked then, what I would be doing now, I would never have imagined it would be this.

I was riding the Staten Island Ferry on my way to court like any other morning, when I looked up and saw the second plane fly overhead into the World Trade Center just a few blocks from my home in Battery Park City. Before long, with a thunderous roar, a portion of the city skyline was erased from Manhattan's landscape.

I had no way of reaching my family for nearly two days. When we were finally reunited, I learned that my husband had been hit in the head by debris and knocked unconscious. Fortunately our doorman, "following his instinct", found and revived him outside our apartment building.

Although a practicing Buddhist prior to 9/11, I rarely took time for introspection. My focus instead was on rising in the partnership ranks of the elite law firm of which I was a part. I was so intently focused on achieving "success" that it took an event of this magnitude to awaken me to the realization that I was looking in the wrong place.

In Buddhist philosophy, human instinct is considered real knowledge, based on insight and the wisdom from our true nature. When asked about what brought me to California, I usually answer, "I felt it was the right thing to do." There was no guiding principle, logical analysis, or data gathering that supported our decision to move across the country from one coast to the other where my husband and I had no family, friends, or jobs awaiting us.

In less than a week of our arrival in Los Angeles, I had accepted a position as in-house counsel with an insurance company. Sifting through my predecessor's mail, I found a brochure on Pepperdine University's L.L.M. program. My firm belief that there are no coincidences in life, and that everything happens for a reason, led me to look into the Masters of Law program that Pepperdine offers in Alternative Dispute Resolution. While not evident at the time, I was en route to finding my mentor.

In classic Greek mythology, Odysseus asked his friend Mentor, a wise teacher, to watch over his precious son, Telemachus, as Odysseus embarked on a lengthy voyage. As a surrogate parent, Mentor gave support, love, guidance, protection and blessing to the young child. Thus, we have come to know mentors as those who gently guide and nurture the growth of others during various stages of their development.

As a young physician with humble beginnings, my father began his medical practice seeing patients one day per week. An opportunity presented itself when an older doctor with a thriving 30-year practice was overbooked and asked my father to see a couple of his patients. Although my father was young and relatively inexperienced, the older man took notice of his kind bedside manner, keen intellect and sincere interest in each patient's health and well-being. Soon he developed a sense of comfort and trust that his patients would be well cared for by this young doctor. This was the beginning of a lifelong mentor-disciple relationship between the two men, in which both took sincere interest in the happiness, growth and development of the other.

When the time came for the older man to retire, he declined all offers for the purchase of his over 30-year thriving practice, and chose instead to gift his practice to my father. When asked why, the retiring doctor would reply, "Knowing that the practice I spent my life building is in Dr. Zadeh's hands, and that he won't disappoint my patients, is worth much more to me than the money I would receive from selling my practice to someone else."

Eastern philosophers, particularly Buddhist practitioners, believe that everything is determined by whom a person chooses as a mentor in life, and the kind of disciple chosen by the mentor. Buddhism teaches that nothing can exist entirely on its own, in complete isolation; all things are mutually dependent upon and influence one another.

In the ideal interdependent mentoring relationship there exists mutual fulfillment, compassion, respect, open communication and loyalty, where the reward is not only in reaching one's goals, but also in the very process of guiding and growing together.

I have had the good fortune and privilege to have this relationship and flow of wisdom with my mentor, Jeffrey Krivis, who I met at Pepperdine University. Like my father's mentor, Jeff saw the importance of sharing his experience and knowledge with a member of the next generation in the field. I rely on Jeff, as my mentor, to tell me the good, the bad and the ugly, and to genuinely want my success. As his mentee, I understood and appreciated that Jeff was entrusting me with his name and reputation, which he had spent years of hard work building, and that my actions, whether positive or negative, would impact him by association.

The mentoring relationship is not one to enter into lightly. It comes with responsibility and expectations that both parties must meet if the relationship is to be a successful and rewarding one for all involved. When looking for such a relationship, rely on your heart, your deep, intuitive sense of what seems right, and remember the Taoist principle that the best relationships are like water: benefiting all things and competing with none. When you are ready for this journey, your partner will appear.