



Athena's Gift

By Ann Rolfe

Sometimes you see someone blossom. A transformation – entirely of their own making – but triggered by someone else's words to them. Words spoken to them personally, or addressed to an audience they were part of, words read in a book, an article or online, feedback or an assessment report, even words overheard. Words that are taken in and have impact. Perhaps they resonate, restore or reinforce existing thoughts and ideas, bringing them to life. Or, they may jar, fracture previously held beliefs, challenge opinions with new information or a different perspective that makes us think again.

Who those words come from, how they are delivered and why, influence whether they are received, how they are interpreted and the power they have. This power is there in written words, too. It's the unspoken message: I care about you, I believe in you, I know what I'm talking about and I will support you. It's empowerment – a relationship that is not about spoon-feeding, hand-holding or hand-outs but rather, enabling people to be their best, equipping them to do their best, creating an environment that allows them to fulfil their potential – themselves.

I've experienced it myself – and I'll bet you have to – in a conversation with a friend, colleague or family member, a teacher, a manager or even a stranger. There are things people say that hit home or trigger insight. It may be instant or it may be a slower dawning realisation but your thinking is changed for ever. You alter the course of your life, you may choose a whole new path or make minor or major adjustments. You evolve and grow.

The right person, at the right time, who says the right words when you are in the right frame of mind, enables you to dream, decide and do what you are capable of. This is what I call "Athena's gift".

To the ancient Greeks, Athena was the goddess of wisdom. Greek mythology has her descending from above to take on human form to help beloved mortals. Over the centuries, the name of one such embodiment of goddess-in-man has been kept alive in the myth of Mentor, the wise guide. "Mentor" has come to mean many things. Traditionally, a mentor is a person who supports and assists another but in the 21st century "to mentor" is a verb, it's something we do, all of us, at one time or another. We mentor each other, in one-off conversations or life-long relationships.

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For better or for worse, words are powerful. The casual comment, the throw-away line, the compliment or reprimand, and deliberately chosen words, all mentor-in-the-moment. People take on board what we say and respond inwardly, if not overtly. Often, we don't even know that our words have landed, let alone had impact. We can reinforce a negative self-image, allowing people to become alienated and feel hopeless; or we can cause a positive reaction that benefits them.

Athena's gift is the ability to inspire wisdom in others. We can create the environment for their own thoughts and conclusions to grow and blossom. The seeds of wisdom are there in the mind-garden, what is nurtured will grow.

I have had the pleasure of witnessing transformation, time and time again in mentoring conversations and relationships and in mentoring programs. I have had the privilege of helping people acquire knowledge and skills so that using Athena's gift becomes a natural practice not just a random event. I have been blessed with people in my life who have, and willingly give Athena's gift. How about you?

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