

CHAPTER 9

SURVIVAL MENTORING

The most common form of despair is not being who you are.

—Kierkegaard

At each turning point in life, there is a chance to look back before trying to push ahead. If we look carefully, certain events stand out like landmarks while most things fade in the distance. I was almost fifty years old when I first tried to write a book. For me, it was a meaningful turning point that forced me to look back over my life. For years I had kept copious notes on the things I studied and on key events in my life; but I did not think of that practice as “writing.”

When a journalist asked me when I first knew I was a storyteller, the answer came immediately to mind, though it wasn't an answer I expected or had prepared in any way. It was more like a vision in which I saw myself as a teenager with a book in my hand and a light in my mind. It was the night of my thirteenth birthday and the book was the only gift I recall and in some ways the only thing I needed at the time. Of course, I had all the neediness of youth; but I also had a longing to know why I was alive and why I felt trapped in my family and in our neighborhood. And, I needed to know firsthand if I had anything meaningful to offer the world around me.

I did not understand it at the time, but young people need to know both—if the world has something to offer to them and if they have something to offer to it. Surprisingly, the book in my uncertain hands answered both of those questions. To this day I am grateful for that gift and

the fact that it was also an accident. What I mean is that I didn't choose the book as much as it chose me, and that makes all the difference in this daunting and surprising dance of life. It is one thing to have choices in life; but another level of meaning altogether to be chosen.

I had asked for a history book in the hope that I could find an explanation for what I felt was a world that lacked meaning and a future that might serve no real purpose. My maternal aunt, who encouraged my education and somehow sympathized with my sense of anguish, bought what she thought was a history book and gave it to me. When it turned out to be a book on mythology, she wanted to take it back and exchange it, but I would not let it go. Once it was in my hands, I knew I had something intended for me despite and because it appeared to be the wrong book. It was not what I thought I wanted; it certainly was what I needed. It was mine by mistake and by accident on one level, and it was no mistake and no accident at all on another.

At the time, I did not understand that my life was changing forever. All I wanted to do was to read the entire book from beginning to end and, in what I now know to be true mythological sense, to start from the beginning all over again. I had found my life language, or it had found me; my aunt had given it to me without knowing what she was doing, as if some other hand had a hand in the matter; as if Ariadne was silently handing me the life thread and clue to what I longed for without knowing it.

That night, I was on fire and the memory of it is burned into my heart and soul. Each occasion of looking back reveals more of what happened in that open moment that opened the world to me in a new and, at the same time, ancient way. When the reporter asked when I became a storyteller, I was transported back into that moment that I only later realized was a genius occasion. Only through moments like that do I truly understand the radical meaning of the old idea that genius must be born and cannot be made. That was the crowning moment of my thirteenth birthday; yet it was also the beginning of a second birth in a psychological sense and in mythological terms.

When the opportunity to write a book appeared I was not sure that