

My Mentor

By Michael Sullivan

My mentor lived on a steep mountain in a small stone hut. I would walk to his house from town every day. Ten minutes after leaving the town of Kiefte, I would arrive at the mountain's base where my mentor's well stood. I retrieved two buckets of water and then trudged up the coiled path to the small edifice surrounded by roses.

My mentor taught me all that he knew but his name. Of course, I was always interested in his lessons on literature, philosophy, mathematics, and the natural world, but I often felt most attracted to the enigma my mentor created for himself.

I clearly remember my first lesson when I was seven years old. My father, the King David of Kiefte, led me to the mountain from the town, through the woods, over the bridge, and across the barrens; this was the same path he took to his lessons from my mentor when he was young.

We walked up the mountain, around the boulders that blocked our path, until we reached what appeared to me a muddled mound of boulders. Upon closer inspection, I saw that the mess was actually an orderly building made of carefully placed stones, each secure in their own right. As I approached the hut, it grew and its solid construction appeared more intimidating with each and every step. At last I was at the door, a semi-round piece of wood that seemed to be once painted green. My father looked down at me, and just said "Knock." Staring into my father's warm eyes, I nervously raised my arm to the door.

Knock. Knock.

As the sound echoed, I heard the sound of a book closing behind the door. Next, I heard a deep voice resonate from within.

“You may enter.”

My father laid one of his heavy hands on my back and used the other to twist the door knob and open the door. Within, a bright light shone from the right of the house revealing all that was within. I turned my head to the light to see a window next to a desk covered with piles of books and several pens. To the left of the desk was a makeshift bed constituted of hay and a single sheet. Finally, I saw him, sitting on a delicate-looking wooden rocking chair. He rested his eyes on me. His head was covered with a short layer of somewhat dishevelled hair and a bloated grandiose beard that covered up much of his chest. His nose was aquiline and his skin neither soft nor wrinkled.

With the same deep, relaxed, resonating voice he had used before, he said “Good day, child. I am pleased to meet you. Let us begin our lessons.” With that, my father stared down at me, wished me good luck, nodded to the old man, and left. I was alone in the home of a stranger; silence ruled the household. I finally summoned the courage to speak:

“H-hello. I... I am... my name is Moses.” He sat still with a subtle smirk. I waited before finally speaking again. “And what would your name be.” A few seconds passed.

“My name, son, is of no importance to us here today. Tell me about yourself?”

“I am from Kiefte. I am a prince. I like the outdoors...”

“Very good then. Today and tomorrow and the day after that I am going to teach you about even more things in this world that you will come to love.”

And in this manner, my lessons began. My course of study was varied; we discussed mathematics, ethics, literature, biology, and everything in between. I grew to enjoy meeting with this man every morning for however long we needed, be it one hour or eight.

I was not an only child - I had a younger brother who was named Sukophantes. Sukophantes was a stout, often abrasive boy, who could at times be exceptionally charismatic. Sukophantes never accompanied me to my mentor's hut, but rather stayed in the village to learn from Protagoras, a village elder, with the other children. My parents had tried bringing Sukophantes to my teacher and for the first few lessons things seemed to go well. However, Sukophantes's friends in the village began to ask what he was doing. Sukophantes described what he did every day to his friends and was met with criticism.

"Don't tell me you take that crazy old hermit seriously!" one said to him. Another would say "This toad doesn't even tell you his name? Does he think he's better than us? Do you, Sukophantes? Huh?"

Sukophantes was driven away by the mocking words of his friends and began to skip his lessons. Around this time, I remember one particular exchange I had with my mentor.

"Do you enjoy these lessons, my child? Do you mind walking up here and leaving your town behind?"

"Not at all. It is my favourite part of the day."

"What of your friends? Don't you miss them? Don't they want you to be with them?"

"They do, I think. They say I shouldn't come up here, that it is odd for me to take these lessons. What should I do?"

“Son, come closer and listen to what I must say.” My mentor’s words were becoming hoarser. I walked closer to him. “I have taught you much. Now it is time to answer a question: why? Why do you live? I know many men and women who live for their friends and enemies, fighting for their approval every day. They say I’m a prisoner up here in my little hut, but I look at them and see their shackles of wealth and popularity. An unwise person is a strand of grass in the river, constantly swaying with the current, constantly under the threat of becoming torn off and lost in the sea. A wise man is a boulder in the river, unmoving and protected from the movements of the tide, of the waves, or of the current.”

“You speak strangely. Do you expect me to abandon my friends?”

“No, but be wary of the direction of the stream when acting with them, lest you be swept with them into the ocean. It is not the responsibility of man to shape the forces which act on others, but rather to determine his own actions accordingly. Keep your vessel anchored or the waves will take you where they want to go. Go forth and follow my advice, lest you be cast down by a power outside of human control.”

That was all that my mentor said to me that day. I left the hut; walked down the steep slope of the mountain, past the well, crossed the barrens, and arrived at the bridge. However, that day, I was strangely attracted to the river. Glancing into its water, I failed to see my reflection; instead, I saw protruding rocks which turned the water white and a couple of small fishes vainly attempting to fight the current. I stood there for a few minutes, just watching the movements of the fish as they wrestled with the current while the rock kept its place with ease.

As I spent more and more time up on the mountain with my mentor, I grew further apart from my brother Sukophantes. I remember one particularly heated engagement that occurred

when I was seventeen and he, sixteen. My father had sent me to find my brother at the Academy, the school for the children of the town. It was a large U-shaped building with a spacious courtyard. However, it was clear that the building was hastily built – the stone, bricks, and boulders which constituted its walls seemed disorderly. I approached the Academy that night to see a group of people my age in the courtyard’s corner, their faces obscured by a thick layer of mist. I approached them and spoke.

“Hello. Is Sukophantes here?” I said softly.

“Oh, so your Sukophantes’s brother, eh?” said a gruff looking fellow with a ratty beard.

“Yes I am. Is he here? It is time for us to eat.” The group of boys started to laugh, shifting their heads backwards for a few moments. I looked around and saw Sukophantes; his cheeks were blushed, his mouth was in a partially open frown, and his eyes were piercing – it was clear that he was both embarrassed and deeply indignant. He stepped forward to meet me with a rooster in his hands which was trying to escape.

“Why don’t you go back home, you useless choirboy? Tell father I’ll be back soon enough.”

“Why are you holding a rooster? Did you take that from the barn?” As I finished speaking, the whole group of boys laughed heartily.

“And you’re too stupid to even figure out what we’re doing. You may be older than me but you’re senseless. Why don’t you go up to the mountain with your friend and talk about stories in rocking chairs?”

I was crushed. At home, my brother always respected me and was eager to talk to me when he wasn't hanging about with one of his friends. After unleashing this chain of insults, he turned around and laid his rooster on the ground as another boy did the same. They began bitterly fighting, jumping around and pecking each other. The innocent little creatures I played with in the barn when I was young were being forced to kill each other at the whim of my brother, of all people! I could not stand it – I ran back to the palace, blinded by my tears.

As I walked into the dining hall, I saw my father sitting at the long table under an ornate chandelier, patiently waiting for dinner to be served. My father appeared unfazed and looked into my eyes as I prepared to speak.

“Sukophantes... said he will be here soon.” I tried to avoid eye contact with my parents as I said this. Of course he'd be there eventually, I thought. That's not a lie.

“Sit down, Moses. We gave him warning; if he wants to miss out on a feast, that's his decision!” My father laughed heartily, but my heart felt frozen after my encounter with Sukophantes. I tried to smile as I sat down and waited for supper with them.

That night turned out to be the beginning of my transition to adulthood. A few weeks after that night, my father suddenly passed away. I felt a myriad of distinct emotions as I spoke to him for the last time that eerie evening. He was in his bedroom, lying on his deathbed, when he sent a nurse to find me and bring me into his room to speak with him. I knew that my father was ill, but I did not know the degree of his illness. I was sitting in my study, writing a reflection on ethics that my mentor had assigned for me.

Knock. Knock.

‘Come in,’ I said. The nurse entered and spoke.

“Lord, your father would like to speak to you.” I instantly rose and followed her to his bed chamber. Upon reaching the door, she told me to go in alone. I reached for the door knob and opened it slowly as it sent an unpleasant creaking sound throughout the hallway.

I walked into the room. Everything was dark, except for my father and his lavish bed; a tall candle was placed at his bedside. I slowly approached the light until I was finally kneeling at his side.

Even in his final moments, he appeared unchanged. His brow was still distinguished, his jaw line was still pronounced, and his eyes still seemed to hold all of the truth of the world within them.

“Moses, my son. Oh, my son. The time has come for you.” I began to tremble as I realized what was happening. “It is not the duty of men to seek immortality, but rather to make their mortality worthwhile; this has been the object of my life. I have sought to instill a sense of wisdom in you, my son. I have sent you to the wisest man that has lived. Do you treasure all that I have done for you, son?”

“Yes.” My voice was fragile and weak.

“Speak up Son - it is time for you to accept responsibility. You must be confident in your own judgement. As the father of a new king, I only hope that you follow the path I have set out for you. Never stray from this path son, lest you fall off of a cliff and become a victim of the waves. The sword of Damocles hangs over you, but as long as you rule yourself properly, the

rest will come naturally. You have been a beautiful splendid son to me. Keep being yourself, despite what others do, lest all I have fought for in my lifetime be undone.”

“Father, why must you leave me?”

“Only concern yourself with what is in your hands, King Moses.”

Those were the final words of the late King David. As his head fell into his downy pillow, I was overcome with apprehension rather than melancholy, anxiety rather than sorrow. Of course, I had help in dealing with my new responsibilities from my advisors - my father had left me with a royal council filled with the best civil servants in the land.

I remember the very first time I made the trek up to my mentor’s hut after my father’s death. I entered his secure stone hut and found him writing away at his desk. As I approached him, he stopped writing but did not turn his head.

“King Moses.”

“Yes, my teacher?”

“I am sorry to hear about your father and about yourself.”

“Thank you for your condolences, but why are you sorry for me?”

“Is it unfair to give a man everything and expect him to choose the least for himself? Is it sensible to construct a great palace supported only by a single column? My boy, everything is set against you! A fish spends its lifetime swimming against the current, only to eventually be cast out to sea with all of those who never tried in the first place! When a thousand years have passed, no scientist or philosopher will be able to distinguish the skeleton of a dauntless knight from that

of a murderous bandit. I can do nothing but pity you and wish you luck in dealing with your inevitable fate!”

“Oh, my good mentor, you ought not to worry! I have spent my life under the careful guidance of my father and yourself. I have learned how to rule gracefully and effectively. I will continue to exercise wisdom as I have already in my life. You have seen me remain faithful to learning and what is right rather than what is expedient while my brother took the contrary path. Do not doubt my ability. I shall do you proud.”

“I always told you to be confident in your judgement, but you must remember to make sure your judgement is correct. For now, I advise you to depart so that you may become more accustomed to your new responsibilities. Good day.”

He turned around and began writing again. I turned around as well, left the house, and began carefully stepping down the mountain’s slope. It was clear that he was not angry with me but rather truly concerned with my personal state and the state of the kingdom. I grew excited as I walked down the mountain, over the bridge, and through the forest; the catastrophe of my father’s death was beginning to pass over while I began to realize that I was the supreme king of Kieft. How glorious!

During the first few weeks of my reign, I noticed that all of Kieft grew to appreciate me more than ever before. On the day I was officially declared king, the streets filled with celebratory citizens who were waving the royal flag and singing the royal hymns. Before my father’s death, I viewed the common people with great distrust and imagined the cock-fighters I met in the courtyard of the Academy. However, I came to love the people, *my* people, who would celebrate my every word!

Above all, I rejoiced that I was able to reunite with Sukophantes in a sincere way after I ascended to the throne. I remember sitting in the royal office one day when I heard the door creak as Sukophantes walked in. I was seated behind a large rectangular desk as Sukophantes approached.

“My brother, my dear brother Moses. King Moses, I should say. I thought I would stop by and congratulate you on how gracefully you have handled all matters of state so far and shown yourself to be a capable ruler worthy of our father’s kingdom!” I was initially confused when Sukophantes said this to me. I remembered when he cursed me at the Academy. I needed to demonstrate my authority and determine his motivation

“Why thank you, brother. But I must ask you, is there any reason for your sudden change of heart?”

“No man is perfect, Moses. I am no exception. I know that I was unfair to you, but I am a changed man. Besides, wouldn’t it have been father’s will for us to be close again?”

Sukophantes was now leaning over my desk. Perhaps father’s death actually changed his attitude. Maybe I had proven myself to him by effectively ruling Kiefte for a week. Whatever it was, I was ready to forgive Sukophantes and accept him as a new ally.

“You are absolutely right. I, in turn, apologize for being unforgiving. If there is anything I can do for you, let me know.”

“Actually, I have a single request to make. Although father left the kingdom to you, the undeniably more deserving of us, I am sure that he would have wanted me to help you out in ruling the city.” I did not know what to say. My mentor always told me the importance of

objectivity, of controlling one's self with reason rather than succumbing to sentiment. But the will of my father confused me. Would he have wanted me to yield to my brother, who may have denied his values but was nonetheless his son? I had to make some compromise.

“Of course. As long as you recognize my superiority.”

“Not only do I recognize it, I vow to never betray it.” I had been warned against accepting the opinions of the fickle and knew that I should not fall for my brother's trickery. I needed to distract him with some trivial offering while not burning all of my bridges to him.

“Well then, Sukophantes, I will invite you to a meeting of the royal council.”

“I thank you, my liege. I look forward to serving you.” he turned around and walked away, out of the office. I felt as though I achieved reconciliation, though I was suspicious of Sukophantes's motives.

I knew that despite my young age of seventeen, I could be an effective leader if I followed my mentor's teachings. In due course, I called for a meeting of my advisors to determine the path forward for the kingdom. It went quite well – we made great progress on pressing issues concerning the town garrison and Kiefte's agricultural industry. However, I noticed Sukophantes looked displeased. After all of my advisors had left, he approached me.

“Moses, I need to speak to you for one moment.”

“Of course, brother, what is it?”

“We need to fundamentally change our panel of advisors. They are a bunch of greybeards that don't know what the people in the town want. Isn't your job to rule for those people?”

“How dare you disparage the men our father has recommended for me? I said you could attend the meeting, but I never said you could make fundamental decisions...”

“I have talked to everyone around town, and I’ll tell you this: they tell me that they have some reservations about you. They didn’t love our father like we do. They feel as though they are being oppressed by a privileged group of the elite. They were celebrating because they thought that you would change things at the palace, and now they’re mad that you are keeping everything exactly the same! So ask yourself, do you want the people to support you?”

“Well...I do rule for the people - that is my mandate. But what about father’s wishes? What about the advice of my mentor, who teaches that a government stands on principle rather than on the whim of the populace?”

“Gah, you mentor! Everybody hates that quack! The wishes of the people come first – that is our principle.”

He simply walked off with a confident swagger. Although I felt an urge to resist him, I supposed that he was right – if the people didn’t support me, I would have had no right to rule.

A couple of days later, I called for another meeting in the royal office. One hour before the planned time, the door opened and Sukophantes walked in. Behind him came, in a disorganized attempt at single file, a string of men and women who quickly filled the room. There must have been at least twenty - no, thirty - of them. Some were clean-shaven, some had scraggly beards; some wore torn clothing, some wore fine apparel; some spoke in broken language, some were articulate and eloquent.

“Sukophantes, what is this?” I asked my brother out of intense confusion.

“This is real leadership – allowing all people to have a voice!” the people who filled up the office (and were clearly rounded up from the streets) cheered at Sukophantes’s rhetoric. I, however, was stunned that Sukophantes would try to do such a thing. I also realized that I *needed* the people to support me, lest my support crumble. I tried to clear out my office as diplomatically as possible.

“Good people –I welcome you to my office and thank you for the reception you have given me as your new king. The people cheered at my words – the blood within my veins began to rush. I needed to somehow uphold the applause.

“I am here to usher in a new era of cooperation with the public so that I can meet your needs.” The people shouted praise and the office filled with sound. It was a feeling like no other, hearing my name being exclaimed with passion. After a long seventeen years of spending most of my time alone, I needed more.

“I am speaking from the heart and I’m saying we must... bring down any people in the kingdom who think they are above you all.” I had essentially lost control of myself in my pandering as I continued to be thrilled by the supportive mob. Sukophantes raised a fist into the air and spoke.

“Surely brother, you are suggesting we do something with the *old* royal councillors. My people, what do you say?”

“Capture them!”

“Hurt them!”

“Torture them!”

“Kill them!”

The cheers grew progressively louder as graver threats were declared against the elite council that had ruled over Kieft. I could not possibly say no to the request of my people. I needed to impress them.

“Grab your pitchforks, my people. Today we go on a hunt for those who want to control us! They say that they are prudent for cheating you, the common people. I say that they are thieves!” The cheers grew to a new high.

And so it went – I stormed out of the office with *my* band of followers. I felt so free, controlled by so little and the controller of so many. As I led my group outside, more and more people flocked around us. Sukophantes began to speak.

“Ever since I was a child, I have been oppressed by my father and his oppressive partners in crime. They punished me. They refused to meet my needs. Now we have a new government, with a bold new outlook, dedicated to the people. It is time for us to crush the remnants of the former days.” I was shocked – despite everything I had heard, a central axiom in my life had been the nobility of my father. However, for some reason I could not speak out.

“But wasn’t King David’s reign one of the best in our history? Nothing went wrong. It seemed fine to me.” One civilian in the crowd waved his hands in the air as he made these remarks.

“But what went right? It is time for us to win land, prosperity, and freedom for ourselves!” Sukophantes excited the crowd with his rhetoric. “Now, it is time for you all to dissipate, and do what you will to establish a new order!”

The people stormed off, finding anyone who they suspected of having a connection to the “tyrannical king.” Most everybody in the town brought their ‘enemies’ into the square outside the palace to be killed. The first man they brought was a friend of my father’s and one of the advisors he chose to sit on the royal council. A rough looking man held a knife to his throat and stared into my eyes, looking for approval. The people began chanting “Kill him! Kill him!” I had no choice but to nod. They kept coming, people I had seen in the court almost every day of my father’s rule. And I kept nodding. Little did I know the worst was yet to come.

Down from the mountain, across the barrens, over the bridge, and through the woods they came. They very men that had been cock-fighting in the Academy on that misty night, the very men who had insulted and disparaged me. They came with my mentor, unable to resist in his old age. They carried him, holding his arms and allowing him to drag against the ground. My mentor was bruised and bleeding, yet his facial expression was stoic and unmoving.

They brought him before me. The men cruelly grinned as they stared at me, waiting for my nod. However, my attention was focussed on my mentor. His eyes were open wide, proliferating supreme virtue in every direction. Although his mouth remained closed, he spoke to me that day. All of the lessons that he had ever taught me permeated the air around him and were swept into my mind and I was monetarily reminded of the need for prudence when dealing with the lives of others.

Meanwhile, the crowds grew and grew as they anticipated the murder of my mentor, the misunderstood hero of rationality and wisdom. They cried out for his death in great passion. The men holding him grew impatient and appeared more displeased with me than when I interrupted them at the Academy.

I nodded and heard the movement of the knife as I bowed my head.

By the time I looked back up, I had realized what I had done. I saw the best times of my childhood in the blood that seeped from my mentor's corpse. I saw my sole chance for renewal in his butchered head, which the people were now kicking about. I imagined the rock foundation of my life turning into sand as everything fell away.

I heard the chanting of the mob.

“Sukophantes! Sukophantes! Sukophantes!”

I stormed over to the men whom had murdered my mentored and grabbed the knife from his hands. I then approached Sukophantes and yelled “Why have you done this! Incite the people against all that I value!”

“My lord, the events of today have all resulted from your own decisions.” I gripped the handle of the knife.

“No. You killed my mentor. You and your cursed friends!”

“Yet you were the one who nodded.” I could not take it. Raising the knife up, I jabbed my brother in his chest. He fell to his knees and his face hit the blood-stained ground.

I could not help but cry – what he said was true. It was I that killed my closest comrade, and now it was I that killed my own brother. Suddenly, the ecstasy and stupor of the mob disappeared and was replaced with a feeling of cold remorse. I could only reflect on how quickly principle left me and vice consumed me. Within a couple of minutes, I turned from a beloved king to a villainous rake. The people began to chant yet again.

“Kill the king! Kill the king!”

I spoke.

“What has become of our nation? What has become of prudence and wisdom! What has become of freedom? I have become a slave to the opinions of the merciless and the vile, and have hence become one of them. I have succumbed to everything I was warned against and I have ultimately destroyed everything I believed in. How fickle is the will of the people? One moment, you demand life, the next, death. One moment, you proudly support your king, the next you wish for his death. I have built my palace on a single column, and a very weak column indeed. Worse yet, I have stricken down the strongest column that ever existed, leaving the palace to collapse unto me. Bother not to kill me. I have already killed myself along with my brother and mentor.”

And so I walked away from the crowds. I continued through the forest, over the bridge, and across the barrens. I climbed up the hill until I got to the hut, which had been ransacked by the mob, its once neatly-laid bricks in ruin. And now, here I stand on the mountain’s peak, overlooking the land that was once mine. I stare down the tall cliff and deep abyss that is a step away, and the well, a careful stroll down the mountain’s slope. Either way I go, I am like the fish in the stream, doomed to be swept into the ocean.