Theseus and the Slaying of the Minotaur

The ancient Greeks developed myths about their gods, goddesses, and heroes to help explain the beginnings and early history of their country. Among the most famous of these myths is the story of how Theseus, the greatest hero of Athens, killed the bull-headed man, or Minotaur, that King Minos of Crete kept in a vast labyrinth. The excerpt below is a modern retelling of the story of Theseus and the Minotaur.

As you read the excerpt, note the role that the gods played in the story:

In requital [repayment] for the murder of Androgeus, [his son] Minos had given orders that the Athenians should send seven youths and seven maidens every ninth year to the Cretan Labyrinth, where the Minotaur waited to devour them. This Minotaur, whose name was Asterius, was the bullheaded monster that [the wife of Minos] had borne to the white bull. Soon after Theseus's arrival at Athens the tribute fell due for the third time, and he so deeply pitied those parents whose children were liable [eligible] to be chosen by lot, that he offered himself as one of the victims, despite [his father] Aegeus's earnest attempts at dissuasion [to persuade him otherwise].

On the two previous occasions, the ship which conveyed the fourteen victims had carried black sails, but Theseus was confident that the gods were on his side, and Aegeus therefore gave him a white sail to hoist on return, in signal of success…

Theseus sailed on the sixth day of… [April]… When the ship reached Crete some days afterwards,… Minos's own daughter Ariadne fell in love with [Theseus] at first sight. "I will help you to kill my half-brother, the Minotaur," she secretly promised him, "if I may return to Athens with you as your wife." This offer Theseus gladly accepted, and swore to marry her. Now, before Daedalus left Crete, he had given Ariadne a magic ball of thread, and instructed her how to enter and leave the labyrinth. She must open the entrance door and tie the loose end of the thread to the lintel [door frame]; the ball would then roll along, diminishing [decreasing] as it went and making, with devious [confusing] turns and twists, for the innermost recess where the Minotaur was lodged. This ball Ariadne gave to Theseus, and instructed him to follow it until he reached the sleeping monster, whom he must seize by the hair and sacrifice to Poseidon [god of the sea]. He could then find his way back by rolling up the thread into a ball again.

That same night Theseus did as he was told… When Theseus emerged from the Labyrinth, spotted with blood, Ariadne embraced him passionately, and guided the whole of the Athenian party to the harbor… they all stole aboard their ship, and rowed hastily away…

Some days later, after disembarking [landing] on the island then named Dia, but later known as Naxos, Theseus left Ariadne asleep on the shore, and sailed away. Why he did so must remain a mystery. Some say that he deserted her in favor of a new mistress…; others that, while wind bound on Dia, he reflected on the scandal which Ariadne's arrival in Athens would cause. Others again, that Dionysus [god of wine], appearing to Theseus in a dream, threateningly demanded Ariadne for himself, and that, when Theseus awoke… he weighted anchor in sudden terror; Dionysus having cast a spell which made him forget his promise to Ariadne and even her very existence.

Whatever the truth of the matter may be… when Ariadne found herself alone on the deserted shore, she broke into her bitter laments, remembering how she had trembled while Theseus set out to kill her monstrous half-brother; how she had offered silent vows for his success; and how, through love of him, she had deserted her parents and motherland. She now invoked the whole universe for vengeance, and Father Zeus nodded assent [agreement]…

Ariadne was soon revenged on Theseus. Whether in grief for her loss, or in joy at the sight of the Attic coast, from which he had been kept by prolonged winds, he forgot his promise to hoist the white sail.
Aegeus, who stood watching for him on the Acropolis,... sighted the black sail, swooned, and fell headlong to his death into the valley below. But some say that he deliberately cast himself into the sea, which was thenceforth named the Aegean.

Answer the following questions:

1. What signal was Theseus supposed to give to indicate that his voyage to Crete had been successful?

2. How was Theseus able to slay the Minotaur and escape from the labyrinth?

3. In your opinion, why did the gods play a major role in the story of Theseus and the Minotaur?