

Homer's Advice for Fathers and Sons

Author's Introduction: Imagine if Homer, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, and the other great poets of ancient Greece, Rome, and the Middle Ages had been given the gift, not only to peer into the twenty-first century, but to correspond with we who live in that most confusing and rudderless of centuries. Had it been in their power to do both of those things, what might they say to us? How would they advise us to live our lives? What wisdom from their experience and from their timeless poems might they choose to pass down to us?

Homer: On Fathers and Sons

Greetings, sons of the twenty-first century. I see that the many years that separate your age from my own have removed from your shoulders a great burden: the burden of bearing your father's name. In my day, our names did not stand on their own but were ever linked to the man who fathered us: Achilles, son of Peleus; Agamemnon, son of Atreus; Hector, son of Priam, Odysseus, son of Laertes; Telemachus, son of Odysseus.

That you are no longer named this way gives you great freedom to make your own way in the world. But that freedom, my sons, is fraught with peril. In my day, we knew who we were. We were tethered, not only to a culture and a family, but to a single man whose accomplishments and character helped determine our own.

You, in contrast, see yourselves as unique and separate individuals cut off from all the ties that bind and shape and delineate you as human beings. Too often you set out to define yourselves, when you should be more intent on discovering who you already are. You insist that you are blank slates on which you alone have the right to inscribe your own self-identity.

But that is not what it means to be a man!

We are, all of us, circumscribed within a circle. That circle *does* limit and restrict us, but it also protects and preserves our humanity. Duties and responsibilities weigh down on us from every arc of the circle, but we meet those pressures with our own determination, our own giftedness, our own sense of self. Your true identity will emerge from the struggle between the two.

Too many of you want to step outside that circle. Indeed, you seem to think that you *must* leave the circle to become a full and functioning individual. I think the word you use is self-actualized. But your age is wrong about this. To step out of the circle is to cease to be an individual at all. A true individual is defined by his role in the family and the community. He can no more exist on his own than a vine can that has been cut off from the branch. He may seem strong for a day or a week, but he will eventually shrivel and die for lack of nourishment.

Consider my Telemachus. That poor young man grew up without his father, for Odysseus left Ithaca soon after Telemachus was born and spent ten years fighting at Troy and an additional ten struggling to get home. And yet, though Telemachus waited twenty years to see his father face to face, he knew well his father's reputation for courage and courtesy, for being skilled in battle and mannerly in speech, strong with his arms and smooth with his words.

That was the legacy that Odysseus left to his son, and, although he was not there to instruct him in that legacy, it nevertheless exerted a shaping force on the raw young Telemachus. When tempted to leave the path of virtue, Telemachus called up the image of his father and yearned to follow in his footsteps.

As the day arrived for Odysseus's long awaited return, the

goddess Athena came to Telemachus in disguise and challenged him to be a man: not any man, or man in the abstract, but a man to live up to his father's great deeds. She offered him more than a role model; she offered him a mantle to put on, an identity to step into. Not that he would be a carbon copy of his father, but that he would allow his own unique talents to be taken up into the path set for him by his absent father.

Telemachus did not balk at Athena's challenge, as if it were an affront to his own individuality. To the contrary, he owned it, took pride in it, used it as a tool for building his true individuality. He now knew fully who he was: the son of Odysseus, King of Ithaca, Sacker of Cities. With that knowledge imbedded in his heart, he was finally ready to stand up and assert his role, his purpose, and his identity.

Advised by Athena, he immediately set out on a journey to visit his father's war companions (Nestor and Menelaus) in order to learn news of his lost father. But that is surely not the only reason he took the journey. My Telemachus was hungry to meet those who had known his father firsthand. If anyone could tell him who he was, could assure him that he was indeed living up to his father's reputation, it would be those men who had spent a decade fighting by Odysseus's side.

In the end, Telemachus proved himself a worthy son and successor to his noble father. He even stood beside him and helped him to rid their home and their kingdom of the evil suitors who had been molesting his mother and devouring their property. He took up the destiny handed down to him by his father and added to it his own unique skills and passions.

Oh, dear sons of the twenty-first century, I encourage you to look to Telemachus as you shape your character and seek your way in life. Do not balk at those who call you to live up to your father's reputation. Do not define yourself against him, as so many of your age have done. If you do, you will dash yourselves on the rocks and miss out on your greater calling.

No doubt your father has flaws—as even Odysseus himself was plagued by a haughtiness and impulsiveness that cost him dearly—but do not use that as an excuse to free yourself from the duty of identifying his strengths and making them your own.

Reject the lies of your age and step back into the circle. To do so may not give you an easier life, but it will give you one that has protective boundaries, that has a shape and a purpose, that matters.

—Homer

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