

ARION

WINTER 2015

A JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND THE CLASSICS



A Tribute to My Father

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MY FATHER taught me to draw.” This was dad’s opening at his father’s funeral. That simple sentence was a product of years of rumination. Dad often shared with me his preoccupation with what he would eventually say at his father’s funeral.

My father was immensely grateful to his teachers: Wittkower, Schapiro, Arrowsmith, Muraro, F. W. Dupee, Howard Davis. The list goes on, and Eric and I knew of them all. But what most resonates today is the image of my grandfather, patiently showing my father how to draw horses, when, as a child, dad was confined at home with scarlet fever and nothing to do.

Well, my father taught me to read. When Eric and I were very young, he thought we would enjoy *The Hobbit* and began reading it aloud one day. After *The Hobbit* came the *Lord of the Rings*. We had a lot of down time in Venice with long evenings and no television.

Then one day, dad made a fateful decision. He pulled his tattered copy of Richmond Lattimore’s translation of the *Iliad* off the shelf. It was the copy he had used as a Columbia College undergraduate in Humanities A (the predecessor of what we now call Literature Humanities). The book itself is actually a wonderful artifact, because in it Dad had written his name and dormitory (the old Livingston Hall) in the well-formed block capitals he used in college before adopting the distinctive cursive signature that became his trademark.

I think Dad was initially prompted to pick up Homer after bringing home a children’s edition with illustrations by the Provensons, whose work he had long admired. But I also know that it was the themes of the *Iliad* that somehow guided his hand to the shelf on that fateful day: fathers and sons, vulnerability, loss and abandonment.

I have few well-formed memories of the experience of listening to dad read, but two stand out. I recall struggling to keep up with all the details in the catalog of ships. To this day, when I am confronting a dense scientific paper, outside of my field, about which I am very excited, I recall the catalog of ships and how I had to learn to accept the limitations of my ability to take in many unfamiliar details quickly.

The second memory is the unforgettable words Priam speaks when he first appears at Achilles' feet to ransom the corpse of his son Hector, read by my father:

Achilleus like the gods, remember your father, one who
is of years like mine, and on the door-sill of sorrowful old age.
And they who dwell nearby encompass him and afflict him,
nor is there any to defend him against the wrath, the destruction.

Yet surely he, when he hears of you and that you are still living,
is gladdened within his heart and all his days he is hopeful
that he will see his beloved son come home from the Troad.
But for me, my destiny was evil. I have had the noblest
of sons in Troy, but I say not one of them is left to me . . .
Honor then the gods, Achilleus, and take pity upon me
remembering your father, yet I am still more pitiful;

I have gone through what no other mortal on earth has gone through;
I put my lips to the hands of the man who has killed my children.

A few years before introducing us to Homer my father had lost his younger and only brother Michael to a brain tumor. The following year, when I was seven, my best friend died suddenly of brain swelling.

Dad's therapy for me was Homer, and I think it was also therapy for him. The *Iliad* gave me a language to understand the tragedy of loss. Homer put form to my feelings of vulnerability and abandonment, very big feelings for a little boy. I rarely am able to read Priam's words without tearing up.

After the *Iliad* came the *Odyssey* and then the *Aeneid* (a real step down as a bed-time story, by the way). Homer, and particularly the *Iliad*, became my life-long guides. I did end up studying classics here at Columbia, but it is obviously no

accident that I ultimately became a neurologist. It probably didn't hurt that my father often quoted Meyer Schapiro saying that the two fields he respected most were mathematics and neurology. It is through my work as a neurologist that the impact of dad's reading became most nourishing.

I am a vascular and critical care neurologist. My patients suffer sudden frightening brain injuries: strokes, brain hemorrhages, head trauma. All of a sudden a professor loses the ability to move her right side and communicate with words, a grandmother collapses while caring for her three-year-old grandson, or a young man lapses into a coma, never to awaken. In my work, it is not uncommon for me never to have gotten to know my patients. I meet them when they are on life-support. So I quickly get to know their families, thrust into their midst, their guide to the sudden horror of loss. And often we must make a fateful decision together: Would their loved one choose death if he or she understood the severe and permanent disability that would most likely accompany survival? And I am a stranger to them, a stranger whose power to help is severely limited. In these intimate tragic settings, I call on my own feelings of vulnerability, so I can, as fully as possible, join my patients' families in their depths.

And it is here, where tragedy is at its most acute, that I turn to Homer. Odysseus cast ashore, naked, a complete stranger among the Phaeacians. Our patients are like Odysseus. I must hear their entire story, if not from them, then from their families. Without this I can not provide comfort, guidance, and treatment to the fullest.

I use the example of Odysseus arriving among the Phaeacians explicitly—with my patients' families—to help give them structure to their experience as vulnerable strangers.

I shared with my father, on multiple occasions, the impact of his reading on me and on the care I could offer my patients and their families. He was even able to read a published account, written by the daughter of a patient, which brought to life the relationship I developed with her and her father at the end of his life.

But dad's illness offered him a uniquely privileged view of what it means to be vulnerable. Nearing the end of his life, his heart function so limited that almost every act was effortful, dad was admitted to Mass General to be evaluated for a heart transplant. In an ICU, he was poked and prodded, examined and tested, and dealt with by physicians who were clearly fearful of his illness and its inevitable course. On two occasions, I reminded him of Priam and Odysseus and how a particular interaction with a physician or nurse would have gone better if only that physician or nurse had adhered to the lessons of Homer, and he smiled with that glint in his eye.

Dad taught me to read. He taught me that the feelings I experience reading or listening to literature relate directly to my own feelings and to my relationships to the people I cherish. He taught me to use the language and structure of literature to interpret my feelings and to help others to interpret theirs.

When dad made the choice to open up the *Iliad* and read it aloud to Eric and me, what was he thinking? Was he thinking that I might someday grow up to become a classicist? A neurologist? Was he thinking he was giving me the tools with which to confront the tragic losses our family had experienced? Was he thinking he was preparing me for his inevitable death?

So here I am, a very luck grown-up, whose identity was formed through the experiences of a little boy lying on the couch in our living room in Venice, around the corner from San Maurizio, listening to my father read. I am so grateful to dad for showing himself to me through the literature he chose to share.

**The Iliad of Homer*, Translated by Richmond Lattimore, introduction and notes by Richard Martin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1951, 2011), 24. 486–94, 503–506.

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