

Families That Thrive

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Finding Dad

Dad had been away for twenty years. That's the situation at the beginning of Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus, the dad, spent ten years fighting the Trojan War, and then ten more years trying to get home. About the time he left for the war, his son, Telemachos, was born. This means that Telemachos grew up without a father.

Two of the major goals in *Odyssey* are to get Dad home and to get the son off of the couch. Lacking a father, Telemachos' development into manhood hasn't gone well. He becomes a bit of a couch potato who is given to childish daydreams. There is nothing wrong with daydreams, provided that they don't come to dominate one's life. The problem for Telemachos is that a life of daydreaming has reduced him to paralyzing passivity. To become fully human, Telemachos needs to get off his blessed assurance and do something productive. He needs to get a grip on his childish daydreams and begin to take responsibility for his life.

That's where Athena comes in. She is the Greek goddess of Wisdom. At the beginning of *Odyssey*, she tells her father, Zeus, that she wants to take responsibility for helping Odysseus return home to his wife, Penelope, and their son, Telemachos. Athena also tells Zeus that she intends to visit Telemachos and to nudge and inspire him to take some responsibility and become a man. This she does first, and what we learn from Homer is that Athena is just as concerned with helping Telemachos grow up as she is with getting Odysseus home.

What Athena does with Telemachos is simple: she approaches him and urges him to stand up and take responsibility. She stimulates his volition. Athena cajoles Telemachos to begin to seek news about his father.

Why does she do this? For Homer, finding Dad has to do with becoming connected to what is most important in the past. This means both one's own family past as well as the riches of our history. It has to do with developing skills of wisdom through exploring and reflecting on the best that humans have thought and done. It means exploring and pondering matters of earth-shaking importance.

How do we go about this? Here are some ideas with which to get started:

- Encourage our young people to get off the couch.
- Explore with them some of the best that people have thought and done.
- Help them distinguish the difference between wisdom and childish daydreams.
- Encourage them to become active seekers and players in life.
- Encourage them to quit blaming others for their circumstances.

- Assure them that God will reward their initiative and volition.

As we help our young people to grow up, we ourselves can embrace another insight from Homer: we can recognize that God responds to our initiative, our pursuit of the good, with grace. God responds to our volition with help and encouragement.

At the same time, we can also recognize something that Flannery O'Connor observed: goodness is always under construction. None of us are finished products. What I find interesting is that when we recognize that goodness is under construction, our best qualities begin to emerge.

Parents can recognize the potential for greatness in our children. This doesn't mean that we manufacture a cookie-cutter version of our expectations, but that we nudge our young people to begin to make their own discoveries. It also means that we spend time helping them to recognize and think about some of the best things people have thought and said throughout history.

Perhaps most important, we can share with our young people our own difficulties with the pursuit of truth, making good judgments, and becoming fully human and mature. This will help our children benefit from their efforts to find us.