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A Father's Final Odyssey

My octogenarian dad wanted to study Homer's epic and learn its lessons about life's journeys. First he took my class. Then we sailed for Ithaca.

By [Daniel Mendelsohn](#)

One January evening a few years ago, just before the beginning of the spring term in which I was going to be teaching an undergraduate seminar on the Odyssey, my father, a retired computer scientist who was then eighty-one, asked me, for reasons I thought I understood at the time, if he could sit in on the course, and I said yes. Once a week for the next fifteen weeks, he would make the trip from the house in the Long Island suburbs where I grew up, a modest split-level he and my mother still lived in, to the riverside campus of Bard College, where I teach. At ten past ten each Friday morning, he would take a seat among the freshmen, who were not even a quarter his age, and join in the discussion of this old poem, an epic about long journeys and long marriages and what it means to yearn for home.

It was deep winter when the term began, and my father was worrying a great deal about the weather: the snow on the windshield, the sleet on the roads, the ice on the walkways. He was afraid of falling, he said, his vowels still marked by his Bronx childhood: *fawling*. I would stay close to him as he crept along the narrow asphalt paths that led to the bland brick building where the class met, or up the walkway to the steep-gabled house at the edge of campus which was my home for a few days each week. Often, if he was too worn out after class to make the three-hour drive back home, he would sleep over in the extra bedroom that serves as my study, lying on a narrow daybed that had been my childhood bed. This bed, which he had built himself fifty years earlier, had a little secret: it was made out of a door, a cheap, hollow door, to which he'd attached four wooden legs that are as sturdy today as they were when he built it. I would think of this bed often a year later, after he became seriously

ill, and my brothers and sister and I had to start fathering our father, anxiously watching him as he slept fitfully in a series of enormous, elaborately mechanized contraptions that hardly seemed like beds at all.

But that came later. Now, in the early months of 2011, he would come each week and spend the night in the bed he had made, in the house where I spent a part of each week.

It used to amuse my father that I divided my time among several places: this house on the rural campus; the mellow old home in New Jersey, where my boys and their mother lived and where I would spend long weekends; my apartment in New York City, which, as time passed and my life expanded, had become little more than a pit stop between train trips. “You’re always on the *road*,” my father would sometimes say at the end of a phone conversation, and as he said the word “road” I could picture him shaking his head in gentle bewilderment. For nearly all his adult life, my father lived in one house, the one he moved into a month before I was born—which over time filled up with five children and then was emptied of them, leaving him and my mother to live a life that was quiet and circumspect, at least in part because she didn’t like to travel—and which he left for the last time one January afternoon in 2012, a year to the day after he started my class.

The Odyssey course ran from late January to early May. A week or so after it ended, I happened to be on the phone with my friend Froma, a classics scholar who had been my mentor in graduate school and had lately enjoyed hearing my periodic reports on Daddy’s progress in the seminar. At some point in the conversation, she mentioned a cruise that she’d taken a couple of years earlier, called “Journey of Odysseus: Retracing the Odyssey Through the Ancient Mediterranean.” “You should do it!” she exclaimed. “After this semester, after teaching the Odyssey to your father, how could you *not* go?” Not everyone agreed: when I e-mailed a travel-agent friend to ask her what she thought, her response came back within a minute: “Avoid theme cruises at all costs!” But Froma had been my teacher, after all, and I was still in the habit of obeying her. The next morning, I called my father.

As we talked, we each went online to look at the cruise company’s Web site. The itinerary, we read, would follow the mythic hero Odysseus’ convoluted, decade-long journey as he made his way home from the Trojan War, plagued by shipwrecks and monsters. It would begin at Troy, the site of which is in present-day Turkey, and end on Ithaki, a small island in the Ionian Sea which purports to be Ithaca, the place Odysseus called home. “Journey of Odysseus”

was an “educational” cruise, and my father, although contemptuous of anything that struck him as being a needless luxury, was a great believer in education. And so, a few weeks later, in June, fresh from our recent immersion in the text of the Homeric epic, we took the cruise, which lasted ten days, one for each year of Odysseus’ long journey.

The hero’s return to Ithaca is hardly the only voyage in which the Odyssey is interested. It is not for nothing that, in the original Greek, the first word in the first line of the twelve thousand one hundred and ten that make up the epic is *andra*: “man.” The poem begins with the story of Odysseus’ son, a youth in search of his long-lost father. It focusses next on the hero himself, first as he recalls the fabulous adventures he had after leaving Troy and then as he struggles to return home, where he will reclaim his identity as father, husband, and king, taking terrible vengeance on the suitors who tried to woo his wife and usurp his throne. And, in its final book, it gives us a vision of what a man might look like after his life’s adventures are over: the hero’s elderly father, the last person with whom Odysseus is reunited, now a decrepit recluse who has withdrawn to his orchard, tired of life. The boy, the adult, the ancient: the three ages of man. The underlying journey that the poem charts is a man’s passage through life, from birth to death. How do you get there? What is the journey like? And how do you tell the story of it?

As far as my father was concerned, Odysseus wasn’t worth all the fuss the poem makes about him. Again and again, as the semester wore on, he would find a way to rail against the legendary adventurer. “Hero?” he would sputter at some point during each class session. “He’s no hero!”

His contempt amused the students, but it didn’t surprise me. The first adjective used of Odysseus in the epic—it comes in line 1, soon after *andra*—is *polytropos*. The literal meaning of this word is “of many turns”: *poly* means “many” and *tropos* is a “turning” (which is why a flower that turns toward the sun is known as a heliotrope). On one level, the word accurately describes the shape of Odysseus’ journey: he’s the man who gets where he’s going by meandering—indeed, often by travelling in circles. In more than one of his adventures, he leaves a place only to come back to it, not always on purpose. And then there is the biggest circle of all, the one that brings him back to Ithaca, the home he has left so long ago that, by the time he returns, he and his loved ones are unrecognizable to one another. But “of many turns” is also a canny way to describe the hero himself. Throughout Greek literature, Odysseus is a notorious trickster, given to devious twists and evasions. In contrast with Achilles, the hero of the Iliad—who declares at one point that he

hates “like the Gates of Death” the man who says one thing but means another—the hero of the Odyssey has no scruples about lying to get what he wants.

Odysseus’ sly proficiency as a fabulist, as a teller of tall tales and an outright liar, has endeared him to audiences over a hundred generations; writers and poets, in particular, see him as a virtuoso of language. (In one memorable episode, he uses a pun on the word “nobody” to defeat the Cyclops, a one-eyed giant who has eaten some of his men.) But all this made him unbearable to my father. A mathematician by training, he valued accuracy, precision—a kind of hardness, even. He had meticulously calibrated standards for virtually everything, as if (I often resentfully thought, when I was young) life were an equation and all you had to do was work out the variables: children, marriage, friendships. Everything, for him, was part of a great, almost cosmic struggle between the qualities he championed and the weaker, softer qualities that most other people settled for, whether in songs or cars or novels or spouses. The lyrics of the pop music we secretly listened to, for instance, were “soft”: “Assonance is assonance but a rhyme is a rhyme. You can’t approximate!” Many of my father’s pronouncements took this x-is-x form, always with the implication that to think otherwise, to admit that x could be anything other than x, was to abandon the strict codes that governed his thinking and held the world in place. “Excellence is excellence, period,” he would bark. “Smart is smart—there’s no such thing as being a ‘bad test-taker.’ ” For him, the more arduous something was to achieve or to appreciate, the more worthwhile it was.

All this hardness, the sanity and exactitude and rationality, often made me wonder how he came to acquire the incongruously silly nickname we used for him: Daddy Loopy. True, there were sudden and unexpected softenings that, when I was a child, I used to wish would come more frequently. Some nights, instead of staying hunched over his small wooden desk in the hours after dinner, muttering at the bills as he passed a slender hand over his smooth pate, he would stand up with a sigh and walk across the narrow hallway, into my room, and then, after doing a “super-duper tucker-inner,” sit at the edge of the bed he had built and read “Winnie-the-Pooh” aloud to me. I would lie there in bliss, cocooned like a mummy, unable to move my arms but nonetheless feeling safe as his nasal baritone wrapped itself around the short, straightforward sentences.

And there was the time he took me down to Florida to see his own father, who’d fallen ill. This was in the mid-nineteen-sixties; I was about four. At the

beginning of the flight home, we were told that there was “weather” over New York and that we’d have to circle. I was unsettled by the plane’s continual tilting, by the moon passing our window again and again, and just wanted to get home; but, instead of being impatient with me, my father put a book in my hands and said, “If you look at this, you won’t notice.” My father would occasionally tell this story, ostensibly because it showed what a good, patient boy I had been. But now that I know what it’s like to travel with small children I realize that it’s about how good and patient *he* was. Of course, being my father, he didn’t take long to segue from this tender anecdote into mathematics. The story, he would say as he started to tell it—and this is another reason that the Odyssey makes me think of him—hinged on a riddle: How can you travel great distances without getting anywhere? The answer to the riddle was: If you travel in circles.

In my father’s eyes, the hero of the Odyssey miserably fails the x-is-x test. Hence his derision, the sputtered imprecations: “He’s no hero!”

The first time this happened was around eleven-fifteen on the morning of January 28, 2011, about an hour into the first meeting of Classics 125: The Odyssey of Homer. We’d been talking about the way the poem starts. The proem, as the first few lines of an epic are known, establishes the backstory: our *polytropos* hero has been delayed on his return “after sacking the holy citadel of Troy”; having “wandered widely,” he has been detained by the amorous nymph Calypso, who wants to marry him despite his determination to get back to his wife, Penelope; all the men he took with him to fight in the Trojan War have perished, some through foolish misadventures on the journey home. But, after this brief introduction, the poem turns not to Odysseus but to his son, Telemachus, who was a baby when the hero left for Troy. Now a youth of twenty, he sits around the royal palace as the epic gets going, fretting about the disastrous effects that Odysseus’ two-decade absence has wrought. Not only have the suitors overrun the palace, draining its stores of food and wine, carousing day and night, seducing the servant girls, but the social fabric of the island kingdom has frayed, too: some Ithacans are still loyal to Odysseus, but others have thrown their lot in with the suitors. Meanwhile, Penelope has withdrawn to her chambers, dejected. This is how the Odyssey begins: the hero himself nowhere in sight, the crises precipitated by his absence consuming all our attention.

As the session began, I tried to elicit ideas from the class about why the poem might begin this way. I looked around the big rectangular seminar table and peppered the students with leading questions. Why focus on the son, an

inexperienced youth, and not the father, already famous for his exploits in the Trojan War? What narrative purpose is served by making us wait to meet the hero? Could the information we glean about Ithaca in these opening lines prove to be useful later on? The students stared at their texts in silence. It was only the first day of class, and I wasn't surprised that they were shy; but nonetheless I was anxious. Oh, God, I thought. Of course this would be the class that Daddy is observing.

But then a young woman next to me, who'd been scribbling in her notebook, straightened up. "I think the first book is meant to be a kind of surprise," she said. "So here we are, at the beginning of this big epic about this great hero, and the first reference to him is that he's this kind of *loser*. He's a castaway, he's a prisoner, he has no power and no way of getting home. He's hidden from everything he cares for. So it's, like, he can't go any lower, it can only go uphill from there?"

"Great," I said. "Yes. It provides a baseline for the hero's narrative arc."

It was at this point that my father raised his head and said, "Hero? I don't think he's a hero at all."

He pronounced the word "hero" with slight distaste, turning the "e" into an extended *aih* sound: *haihro*. He did this with other words—"beer," for instance. I remember him telling my brothers and me, after his father died, that he hadn't been able to look into the open casket, because the morticians had rouged his father's cheeks. Then he said, "When I die, I want you to burn me, and then I want you boys to go to a bar and have a round of *baihrs* and make a toast to me, and that's it."

When we'd first talked about the possibility of his sitting in on the course, he'd promised me that he wasn't going to talk in class. Now he was talking. "I'll tell you what I think is interesting," he said.

Nineteen heads swivelled in his direction. I stared at him.

He sat there with his hand in the air. A curious effect of his being in the room with these young people was that now, for the first time, he suddenly looked very old to me, smaller than I remembered him being.

"O.K.," I said. "What do you think is so interesting? Why isn't he a hero?"

“Am I the only one,” he said, looking around at the students, as if for support, “who’s bothered by the fact that Odysseus is *alone* when the poem begins?”

“What do you mean, ‘alone’?” I couldn’t see where he was going with this.

“Well,” he said, “he went off twenty years earlier to fight in the Trojan War, right? And he was presumably the leader of his kingdom’s forces?”

“Yes,” I said. “In the second book of the Iliad, there’s a list of all the Greek forces that went to fight at Troy. It says that Odysseus sailed with a contingent of twelve ships.”

My father’s voice was loud with triumph. “Right! That’s *hundreds* of men. So my question is, what happened to the twelve ships and their crews? Why is he the only person coming home alive?”

After a moment or two, I said, “Well, some died in the war, and, if you read the poem carefully, you’ll recall that others died ‘through their own recklessness.’ As we go through the poem, we’ll actually get to the incidents during which his men perished, different groups at different times. And then you’ll tell me whether you think it was through their own recklessness.”

I looked around the room encouragingly, but my father made a face—as if he could have done better than Odysseus, could have brought the twelve ships and their crews home safely.

“So you admit that he lost all his men?”

“Yep,” I said, a little defiantly. I felt like I was eleven years old again and Odysseus was a naughty schoolmate whom I’d decided I was going to stand by even if it meant being punished along with him.

Now my father looked around the table. “What kind of leader loses all his men? You call that a hero?”

The students laughed. Then, as if fearful that they’d overstepped some boundary, they peered down the length of the seminar table at me, as if to see how I’d react. Since I wanted to show them I was a good sport, I smiled broadly. But what I was thinking was, *This is going to be a nightmare.*

In the weeks that followed, my father drew up an extended charge sheet of Odysseus’ failings.

“He’s a liar and he cheated on his wife,” he’d say. (He was right: whatever his yearning for home, Odysseus does sleep with Calypso every night of his seven years with her.)

“He’s always crying!” he’d exclaim, referring to Odysseus’ bouts of homesick weeping. “What’s so *haihroic* about that?”

And then there was the “real weakness” in the epic. “He keeps getting help from the gods!” my father said. “Everything he does, every bit of success he has, is really because the gods help him.”

“I’m not so sure,” I said, when this came up. We were talking about a passage in Book 6 in which Athena dramatically enhances Odysseus’ looks so that he can ingratiate himself with the rulers of an island where he has just washed ashore. “The poem also makes clear that even without the help of the gods he’s very clever—”

“No,” my father said, with a ferocity that made some of the students look up from their note-taking. “No. The whole poem happens because the gods are always helping him. It starts because Athena decides it’s time to get him home, right? And then the reason he’s able to get away from Calypso is because Zeus sends Hermes to tell her to let him go.”

“Well, yes,” I said, “but—”

“Let me finish,” he pushed on, the jackhammer rhythm of his argument, with its accusatory emphasis on certain words, familiar from other, much older arguments. “So it’s really the *gods*. And it’s *Athena* who keeps dolling him up when he needs to look good.”

He made a little face when he said “dolling him up.” The students chuckled.

“Yeah, what is that about?” one of them snorted. “Now he has curls ‘like the blossom of a hyacinth’? Not very manly!”

“It does seem a bit artificial for him to get this total makeover,” the girl who sat next to me said. “Why isn’t it good enough for him just to wash off and put on some nice clean clothes?”

“She dolls him up,” my father said again, “and helps him in a lot of other ways. So it’s pretty obvious that he gets a lot of help directly from the *gods*.”

His vehemence took some of the students aback. It didn't surprise me. The religion thing, I said to myself. Here we go.

He abhorred religion and rituals. Having to attend ceremonies of any kind reduced him to adolescent sulking. He would slouch low in the pews at weddings or bar mitzvahs or confirmations, covering his eyes with the fingers of his left hand, the way you might cover your face during a slasher movie, wincing like someone with a headache, and mutter his atheistic invectives to me or my siblings or, sometimes, to no one in particular as the rabbi or the cantor or the priest droned on: "Nobody can prove this crap. It's like voodoo!" He would leaf through the prayer books as if their pages were evidence of a crime, stabbing a finger at this or that passage with an incredulous shake of his head.

After repeating, "He gets a lot of help from the *gods*," my father sat back in his chair.

One of the students said, "Well, yeah, I have to agree with what, uh, Mr. Mendelsohn said. The thing that stuck out to me the most this week was how much Athena intervenes in the story. It's like she's holding Odysseus' hand even when it seems unnecessary. After all, if Odysseus is such a great trickster, why can't he trick his way back home on his *own*? If everything is predetermined to go his way, then why should I be impressed by his masterful cunning or physical abilities?"

My father was beaming: "Exactly! Without the gods, he's helpless."

It was when he said the word "helpless" that I suddenly understood. I had been thinking that his resistance to the role of the gods in the *Odyssey* was just part of his loathing for religion in general. But when he said the word "helpless" I saw that the deeper problem, for my father, was that Odysseus' willingness to receive help from the gods marked him as weak, as inadequate. I thought of all the times he had growled, "There's nothing you can't learn to do yourself, if you have a book!" I thought of the 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air under whose chassis he had spent so many weekends, reluctant to let it die, a pile of car-repair manuals just within reach of one greasy hand; of the Colonial armchairs he had painstakingly assembled from kits in the garage "with no help from anyone." I thought of how, after taking out the appropriate books from the public library on Old Country Road, he had taught himself how to write song lyrics, how to build barbecue accelerators, to create a compost heap, to construct a wet bar. No wonder he was allergic to religion. No wonder

he couldn't bear the fact that—right up until the slaughter of the suitors, at the end of the poem—the gods intervene on Odysseus' behalf.

If you needed gods, you couldn't say you did it yourself. If you needed gods, you were cheating.

A month after the end of the semester, my father and I were on a ship in the middle of the Aegean, retracing the Odyssey.

At the start of the cruise, he'd been tense. He was prickly when his taxi pulled up in front of my apartment building in New York for the trip to J.F.K. and our flight to Athens. He'd insisted on hiring his local car service for the drive, and when I made a face on entering the sedan—it had no air-conditioning, and the day was very hot—he snapped, "A taxi is a *taxi*." After we landed and collected our luggage, we boarded the air-conditioned coach that would take us to Piraeus, the port of Athens. My father seemed as tightly coiled as a spring.

As the bus lurched and twisted its way through the traffic, which had been snarled by demonstrations protesting the country's economic crisis, a representative from the cruise line gave a brief orientation. We'd board our small ship in midafternoon, and at cocktail time there'd be a welcome reception, followed by an introductory lecture. After dinner, we'd start our twelve-hour voyage across the Aegean toward Çanakkale, in Turkey, the site of Troy's ruins, which we'd visit in the morning.

When my father and I were booking our tickets, a few weeks earlier, he had surprised me by insisting on paying for one of the more expensive cabins. It had a private balcony. Entering the cabin for the first time, he looked around, surveyed the sleek furnishings, and then walked onto the balcony, loudly sniffing the Mediterranean air. But even though he seemed to approve of the posh touches, the orchids and the cocktails waiting on a gleaming side table, I could sense in him a kind of resistance, as if he were going to prove to me by the end of our ten days at sea that the Odyssey wasn't worth all this effort, all this luxury.

Almost imperceptibly, however, he started easing into the rhythm of our days. Mornings were for trips ashore to visit the sites associated with the epic. Many of these were not easy to access, and we'd return from our excursions exhausted and dusty, grateful for the tall glasses of lemonade and iced tea that would be handed to us after we'd climbed back up the gangplank. Early evenings were for bathing and changing; then there was dinner.

After a couple of days at sea, a small group of passengers started to gather after dinner each night around a piano in the ship's bar. My father would invariably request one of his favorites from the Great American Songbook. It was this more than anything, I think, that relaxed him as the days and nights passed. These reminders of home—the words he knew so well, the echoes of the culture of his past—reassured him. He seemed almost visibly to unclench once he was settled into a chair with a Martini, singing along in a raspy Sprechstimme as the pianist played:

Is your figure less than Greek?

Is your mouth a little weak?

When you open it to speak, are you smaaaart?

My father took a sip of his Martini and smacked his lips. “Ah, so great. Rodgers and Hart. That's when a song was a song!”

To my surprise, it was soon clear that he was enjoying the rituals of the cruise itself—the late-night cocktails and the piano-playing, the desultory conversations with strangers over drinks or at breakfast—at least as much as he did the sites. He even seemed to enjoy the fussy pre-dinner dressing up. Clothes, to put it mildly, had never been his forte; it was always a bit of a shock to see him wearing anything other than one of his beloved hooded sweatshirts, blazoned with the names of the schools my brothers and sister and I—and, later, our children—had attended. On the first night of the cruise, when we were getting ready for the welcome cocktail party, he started to put on a brown polyester shirt, which I snatched from his hands and threw over the balcony railing into the Aegean.

“*Daddy!* It's a Mediterranean cruise! Mom must have packed something blue or white!”

“Whaaat? A shirt is a shirt!”

At the start of the trip, I'd worried that the physical demands of the daily excursions would be too much for him. He was three months shy of eighty-two, after all, and there was a great deal of walking—which, in Greece, inevitably means walking up hills. But, as it turned out, his problem was something else.

“It doesn’t really look that impressive!” he exclaimed, the morning we walked around the ruins in Çanakkale—the first of many times that he let on that a site wasn’t living up to his expectations. As he grumbled, Brian, the cruise’s resident archeologist, lectured us on the history of the site. He explained that there had been a number of successive Troys over the millennia, each rising and falling in turn. Among the ruins of these, he went on, there was evidence of a “major catastrophe” that had occurred around 1180 B.C.—the traditional date of the fall of Homer’s Troy. As he said this, people murmured knowingly and wrote in their notebooks.

My father listened attentively but looked skeptical as we picked our way among the dusty paths and walkways, the giant inward-sloping walls, the heaps of gray stones rising out of patches of yellowed grass. In the obliterating sunlight, the stones appeared weary and porous, as insubstantial as sugar cubes.

My father looked around. “Obviously, it’s *interesting*,” he said. “But . . .”

His voice trailed off and he shook his head.

“But what?” I was curious.

To my surprise, he suddenly threw an arm around my shoulders and patted me, smiling crookedly. “But the poem feels more real than the ruins, Dan!”

During the week that followed, this became a refrain of his. “The poem feels more real!” he’d say each evening, as people discussed the day’s activities. When he did so, he’d cast a quick sidelong glance at me, knowing how much the thought pleased me.

One night, after we’d traipsed around a ruin in the southwestern Peloponnese which is known as “Nestor’s palace”—Nestor is an elderly comrade of Odysseus’, whom Telemachus visits in Book 3, looking for news of his father—he turned to the group around the piano.

“Obviously, I’m glad I got to see the places and be able to make a connection between the real places and what’s in Homer,” he said.

People nodded, and he went on. “If I would have read Book 3 now, for instance, I would know exactly what the seashore of ‘sandy Pylos’ looks like”—he wiggled his fingers to indicate that he was quoting verbatim—“where Telemachus landed. And now we all have a sense of Troy, the way it’s sited,

how it looks out with the water in the distance. That's great. But for me it's a little bit empty compared to the story. Or maybe half-empty. It's like these places we're seeing are a stage set, but the poem is the drama. I feel that *that* is what's real."

I smiled and said, "Don't tell me we've come all this way to retrace the Odyssey and now you're telling me that we could have stayed home."

"It's like 'The Wizard of Oz,' " my father said jauntily. " 'There's no place like home . . . ' "

Brian turned to me. "Would you say that that movie is actually an Odyssey-based story?" he asked.

"It was a book first," my father interrupted. "L. Frank Baum!"

I thought for a moment. "Sure," I said. "Totally. The protagonist is torn from home and family and experiences fabulous adventures in exotic locales where she meets all kinds of monstrous and fantastical beings. But all the time she's yearning to go home."

My father was staring down into his Martini. "That movie came out just before the war started," he said, wistfully. "Weeks before, as I recall. Your grandfather was working away from home that summer on a big project, but he was home just then, and he took me and my brother Bobby to the Loews Theatre to see it. Man, in those days when you saw a movie it was really an experience. Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney did a floor show. An organ came out of the floor!"

The small group huddled around the bar had grown quiet as he spoke. To them, I realized, this was who he was: a lovely old man filled with delightful tales about the thirties and forties, the era to which the music tinkling out of the piano belonged, an era of cleverness and confidence. If only they knew the real him, I thought ruefully. His face now, relaxed and open, mellow with reminiscence, was so different from the one he so often presented, at least to his family. I wondered whether there might be people, strangers he had met on business trips, say, bellhops or stewardesses or conference attendees, to whom he also showed only this face, and who would therefore be astonished by the expression of disdain we knew so well. But then it occurred to me that perhaps this affable and entertaining gentleman was the person my father was always meant to be, or had possibly always been, albeit only with others. Children always imagine that their parents' truest selves are as parents. But why? "No one truly knows his own begetting," Telemachus bitterly observes,

early in the Odyssey. Indeed. Our parents are mysterious to us in ways that we can never quite be mysterious to them.

The only time my father didn't cap off an evening in the ship's lounge by saying "the poem feels more real" was after we'd gone to Gozo, a small island off Malta, to see a cave that, according to local legend, belonged to Calypso. We'd been warned that the descent into the cave was rocky and difficult, and that only a few people could go inside at a time, given how cramped it was. Elderly passengers and those who had "mobility issues" were advised not to visit the site.

When I heard all this, I was determined not to go. I suffer from claustrophobia: simply being in an elevator sets my teeth on edge. There was no way I was going into Calypso's cave.

"What are you talking about?" my father exclaimed when I told him. "You have to go! Seven-tenths of the Odyssey takes place there!"

"Seven-tenths?" I had no idea what he was talking about. "The epic is twenty-four books long—"

"Math, Dan! *Math*. Odysseus spends ten years getting home, right?"

I nodded.

"And he spends seven years with Calypso, right?"

I nodded again.

"So, in theory, seven-tenths of the Odyssey actually takes place there! You can't miss it!"

"Well," I protested weakly, "actually, no. The poem isn't actually equal to his life. They're two different things."

But he wasn't convinced. "You can't argue with *numbers*," he said.

We got on the bus and went. As the bus rattled and bumped along the rocky roads, it became touchingly clear that my father was trying to distract me. "Look at those beautiful blue flowers!" he would say, pointing. I looked without seeing; I was thinking about the cave.

We pulled up at the site and found ourselves on the brow of a barren hill. Withered bushes clung to the dun-colored dirt. A narrow parapet above the cave looked out at the glittering sea; about twenty feet below was the opening—a dark vertical gash in the face of the rock, surrounded on either side by parched scrub. A few people had already made the descent and were disappearing into the cleft.

A clammy terror seized me. I shook my head. “No,” I said to my father. “Nope, sorry. I’m not going. You go. You’ll tell me what it’s like.”

“Oh, come *on*, Dan,” my father said. “I’ll be with you. It’ll be fine.”

Then he did something that astonished me. He reached over and took my hand. I burst out laughing. “Daddy!”

“You’ll be *fine*,” he said, holding my hand, a thing I couldn’t remember him having done since I was a small boy. His own hand was light and dry. I looked at it awkwardly.

“I will *be* there with you every step of the way,” my father was saying. “And if you hate it we’ll leave.”

I looked down at our clasped hands and to my surprise found that I felt better. I looked around to see if anyone was watching and then realized, with a complicated feeling of relief, that the others would assume that I was leading my elderly father by the hand.

And so it was that I visited Calypso’s cave with my father holding my hand. He held it as we made our way down the rocky path to the entrance. He held my hand as we crouched down to squeeze through the opening; he held my hand as we shuffled around inside, my heart thumping so hard that I was surprised the others didn’t hear it; held my hand as I said firmly that, no, I didn’t want to go through a passageway to see the spectacular views of the bay below; held my hand as I scrambled at last into the hot, dry air, not even bothering to conceal my panic. Only after we were back at the parapet above the cave and walking toward the waiting bus did he let go of my hand.

“You O.K., Dan?”

I grinned shakily. “I think this is one time when we can say that the poem does *not* feel more real,” I said.

“Ha!” my father said. Then he lowered his voice and said, “You did good, Dan.”

In the lounge that evening, Elena, the tour manager, asked people what they’d thought of Calypso’s cave. I looked across at her. That morning, I had told her about my claustrophobia. “You really don’t have to go,” she had said. “A lot of people are staying aboard because for them it’s too difficult.” I’d felt a flood of relief so intense that it was vaguely shaming. But something stopped me from accepting the excuse she was offering: I didn’t want my father to see me afraid. Later that day, after we’d got back, I bumped into her on deck and told her what had happened: my panic attack, Daddy holding my hand.

“Wonderful!” she had cried.

Now, as people recalled the excursion, she smiled at the two of us warmly.

“See? You survived!”

“Survived?” someone asked.

I was searching for something to say, when my father cut in.

“We had a *great* time,” he said, loudly.

I tried to catch his eye, but he was leaning forward, facing into the ragged semicircle of armchairs like a teacher addressing a study group.

“I didn’t want to go,” my father said to them. “Hills are hard for me. I thought it would be too much for me physically. But Dan helped me, and I’m glad I went. After all, Odysseus spends seven-tenths of his adventures there!”

He paused, not looking at me, and said, “It was one of the more impressive things I’ve seen, actually.”

Elena murmured, “Your father is a very charming man.”

During our ten days at sea, we saw nearly everything we’d hoped to see, the strange new landscapes and the debris of the various civilizations that had occupied them. We saw Troy; we saw Nestor’s palace; we saw Calypso’s cave. We saw the elegantly severe columns of a Doric temple left unfinished, for reasons impossible to know, by some Greeks of the Classical era in Segesta, on Sicily, where Odysseus’ remaining crew ate the forbidden meat of the cattle that belonged to the sun god, Hyperion, the climatic instance of foolishness which got them all killed. We visited the desolate spot near Naples which, the ancients believed, was the entrance to Hades. We passed through the Strait of

Messina—where Odysseus had to navigate between the man-eating monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. And of course we saw the sea, always the sea, with its many faces, glass-smooth and stone-rough, at certain times blithely open and at others tightly inscrutable, sometimes a weak blue so clear that you could see straight down to the sea urchins at the bottom, spiked and expectant-looking, like mines left over from some war whose causes and combatants no one remembers, and sometimes an impenetrable purple, the color of the wine that we refer to as red but the Greeks call black.

We saw all those things during our travels, all those places, and learned a great deal about the peoples who had lived there. But we were unable to make the last stop on the itinerary. On the day before we were to start sailing to Ithaki, the captain announced that, because of nationwide strikes protesting the austerity measures being forced on Greece, the Corinth Canal was going to be closed. The canal was to have been our shortcut back to Athens from the Ionian Sea, on Greece's west coast, where Ithaki lies; now, in order to get back to Athens in time to make our flights, two days later, we'd have to spend the next day and a half sailing all the way around the Peloponnesian peninsula.

And so we never reached Ithaca, never saw Odysseus' home. But, then, the Odyssey itself, filled as it is with sudden mishaps and surprising detours, schools its hero in disappointment and teaches its audience to expect the unexpected. For this reason, I came to feel that our not reaching Ithaca may have been the most Odyssean aspect of the whole excursion. After we got back home—just before my father tripped in a parking lot and fell, the beginning of a chain of events that led, finally, to a massive stroke that left him helpless and unrecognizable, unable to breathe on his own, to open his eyes, to move, to speak—after we got home I would sometimes joke with Daddy that, because we had never reached our goal, our journey retracing the Odyssey could still be considered incomplete, could be thought of as ongoing.

But now, on the morning of the last full day of the cruise, we sat glumly on our balcony, thinking about Ithaca and drinking our coffees in silence as the ship strained toward Athens. At one point, trying to lighten the mood, I said, "It's actually sort of cool, our not getting to Ithaca. It's the infinitely receding destination!" But he shook his head and said, "It's just a ten-day tour."

A moment or two later, a steward knocked on the door of our cabin and handed me a note from the captain. It said that he was aware that I had recently published a translation of the works of the modern Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, who lived in Alexandria at the turn of the last century. One

of Cavafy's best-known poems is called "Ithaca," and the captain wondered whether, since our destination had suddenly "disappeared," as he put it, I would consider filling the void by giving a reading of the poem and perhaps a short lecture about it. This way, although we would miss the real Ithaca, we would at least visit it metaphorically.

This captain is smart, I thought. For although Cavafy's poem is named after the most famous destination in world literature, it is about the virtues of not arriving.

This is why, just around the time we would have been visiting Ithaki, I stood at a lectern in front of a small group of passengers on a boat in the middle of the sea, talking about "Ithaca." I started off by discussing the other poets who had taken the Odyssey's hero and refashioned him for their own purposes. In Dante's *Inferno*, Odysseus (given his Latin name, Ulysses) is damned for deceitfulness and madly sails over the edge of the world. In the nineteenth century, the character's perpetual restlessness made him a Romantic hero. In 1833, the young Alfred Tennyson wrote a poem called "Ulysses," a dramatic monologue spoken by the aging hero. Long since returned, the "idle king" reflects on a bitter irony: life back on Ithaca is not what he'd dreamed of during his years away. The homecoming is revealed as odious; it was in the adventuring, he realizes, that the meaning of his life had lain. "How dull it is to pause, to make an end," he muses. In its much quoted final line, "Ulysses" sums up the very spirit of travel, of adventure: "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Cavafy knew Tennyson's poem well. In his "Ithaca," published in 1911, he reiterates the earlier poet's wariness about getting where you think you want to go. "Hope that the road is a long one," his anonymous speaker admonishes an addressee who may be Odysseus but may also be the reader. The poem then goes on to catalogue the riches that only travel can bring: harbors we have never seen before; fabulous treasure from foreign ports, amber and ebony and coral, exotic perfumes; and encounters with wise strangers. Of course, we must remember our destination, whatever that may be; but it becomes clear that life's meaning derives from our progress through it, and what we make of it:

Always in your mind keep Ithaca.

To arrive there is your destiny.

But do not hurry your trip in any way.

Better that it last for many years;

that you drop anchor at the island an old man,

rich with all you've gotten on the way,

not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.

"Ithaca" articulates, at a high level of refinement, what has become a cliché of popular culture: that the journey is more important than the destination.

That evening, as we were packing our bags, my father said, "Well, clichés are clichés for a reason." He'd spent the afternoon reading the Tennyson and the Cavafy on his iPad.

"Do you believe it?" I asked. "That stuff about journeys and destinations?"

"I think both are probably important," he replied after a moment. "I mean, obviously I believe in results, in achieving things." [cartoon id="flake-2015-10-12"]

I thought of how hard he'd pushed us to achieve when we were in school, and shot him an amused look, which he chose not to notice.

"So I guess that's what people mean by the 'destination' part," he went on. "Getting where you want, fulfilling your goals. I'm not so sure I believe that that's not important. In life, you're judged by what you accomplish."

I'd heard this before.

"But I can see the other side, too," he added. "You have to explore things, you have to try things . . ." He grew quiet. I thought of the visits we used to make, back in the sixties and seventies, to see his close friend Nino, a professor of mathematics, who loved to travel. After describing his latest trip to Italy, Nino would say, "But Jay, Jay! You should travel sometime!," and my father would shake his head and say, "You don't understand." I wondered how many things my father had wanted to try and hadn't, for one reason or another.

"Well, at least you're trying things now!" My voice sounded brittle in my ears.

He looked mellow. “Yeah, Dan, this has been a great . . .” He seemed to be on the verge of saying something else, but in the end was quiet.

“Now that I’m old,” he said presently, “I guess I can see the part about the importance of being out there and trying things even if you fail. You have to keep moving, at least. The worst thing is to go stale. Once that happens, you’re finished. So I guess I agree to some extent that the journey is something, too, if by ‘journey’ they just mean sticking in the game of life.”

After a moment, I said, “Then you do agree with Tennyson and Cavafy: to arrive at the destination means it’s all over, it’s a . . . an end.”

With a kind of embarrassment, I realized that I couldn’t bring myself to say the word “death.” But he knew what I meant.

“I think that they’re saying that for these guys to get back home is in some ways like dying. When they stop their travels and adventures, they’re foreclosing the possibility that other things will ever happen to them. So being home in familiar surroundings rules out something from their lives.”

He looked down at the bed.

“There’s no more . . . uncertainty,” he said after a minute, almost to himself. “There’s nothing left to know.”

“Uncertainty,” I repeated. I was surprised to hear a note of admiration in his voice as he’d said the word. It wasn’t one I’d have thought he approved of: what had his life been dedicated to, after all, but certainty—equations, formulas, the tools of quantification? I thought of his struggles over the past few years with ill health: a run-in with prostate cancer, a bout of shingles, an emergency appendectomy. He had endured these afflictions so quietly that it never occurred to me to wonder whether he’d begun to be afraid of what might be next. Did he lie awake at night working out some algorithm, some way of calculating his own chances?

“Daddy,” I said.

“What?”

I took a breath. “Are you afraid of dying?”

I was surprised by how swiftly he answered. He frowned a little—not at me, but the way he did when confronted by some knotty problem, a crossword puzzle or a tax return or a set of instructions for assembling a piece of furniture which didn't make sense to him.

"I'm not afraid of *being* dead," he said. "At that point, there's no consciousness. You're out of the woods. It's the lead-up to dying that I'm"—his voice trailed off, and I realized he didn't like to say "afraid"—"concerned about. Falling apart, being diminished. Not being all there. You remember what my mother was like at the end."

I remembered. Nanny Kay had had Alzheimer's. I still remember the expression on my father's face when, during what turned out to be her last visit to us, she looked at him and said, "And who are *your* parents?"

"I don't want to get like that," he went on. "Being dead itself can't be bad. It's just nothing. Zero. But what happened to your grandmother—that's worse, as far as I'm concerned. Worse than zero."

"A negative number?" I said, making a joke of it.

"Yeah," he said, although he wasn't smiling. Then he said, "So, yes, you want to keep going, keep doing things. But doing things as *yourself*, not as some kind of zombie."

He looked down again. I knew he was thinking about his mother, what people had kept saying as her illness took its toll. Kay had been so clever, Kay had been so sharp! This wasn't Kay, it was someone else. She's not *herself* anymore. It was a kind of illness, I thought as I remembered this, that raises questions that are asked by the *Odyssey*, a poem about a hero who's so good at lies, at deceits and disguises, that, once he finally gets home, he has a difficult time proving that he is who he says he is. What is the "self," exactly? Do you remain "yourself" even after undergoing radical transformations, physical and mental? It was a question that I, too, would be asking, a few months later.

We stood there for a while, not saying anything. Finally, I said, "Anyway, I guess that's what I meant earlier today when the captain made the announcement and I said I liked the idea of not getting to actually see Odysseus' island. By not getting to see Odysseus' home, we've kept the ending at bay. The story can go on and on."

After a pause, he said, “So I was right all along.” His voice was sly; the sombre mood had evaporated.

“Right about what?”

“The poem actually *is* more real than the place!”

The next day, we flew home. ♦

This article appears in other versions of the April 24, 2017, issue, with the headline “An Odyssey.”

- *Daniel Mendelsohn, an author and critic, teaches at Bard. His new memoir, “An Odyssey: A Father, a Son, and an Epic” will be published in September.*