

An epic journey with my sons through Virgil's 'The Aeneid'

"Boys, what do you think?" I lifted my eyes from the book to their faces. "Do you suppose what these two lads did was good?"

We were finishing Book Nine. The Trojans, after a long, weary flight from their incinerated home, have landed in Italy. They are near exhaustion. Their leader, Aeneas, is miles away. An enemy presses upon them, expecting to smash their lines at daybreak, driving the party back into the sea. The huddled band commiserates.



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At this moment two young warriors, Euryalus and Nisus, advance a plan. They volunteer to sneak out of camp to fetch Aeneas and alert him of his army's impending collapse. With solemn oaths and the blessing of the elders, they dash out of the light of the camp's fire.

Matters go better and worse. Instead of slipping through the plains under the cover of night the two conduct some freelance work, slitting enemy throats while eyelids rest in deep sleep.

All goes swimmingly at first, like child's play. The easy blood lulls them on till the first light of morning calls off their carnage. By the time they direct themselves toward their true errand, Fortune has turned. A returning party of enemy troops swoops down and, after a scuffle, sets their fine heads upon two pikes that greet the Trojan camp at dawn.

Back to our living room. I again press my question, "Did they do well or not?" The boys in front of me erupt – it takes so little to get them going – with

shouts. Peter, the eldest at 12: "Yes, of course, they killed lots of men, and only lost two..." My next son, Joseph, is not so sure. The younger boys continue twirling in half-somersaults on the couch. Thomas, 9, retorts, "Definitely not!" and then, "You shouldn't kill men in their sleep." Someone else, "And besides, they should've fetched Aeneas..."

So began that night's round of debate with my little troop of philosophers, as all children are, on the costs of war, the meaning of fair play, and the justice of the gods. You see, I just finished reading a handsome adaptation of Virgil's *Aeneid* to my seven sons, and I have been pondering ever since why I am so pleased to have read with them this book.

Our household is, by decent metrics, exceedingly normal. Our kids work and fight and play together. No one is fluent in Latin, though we're all trying to learn it. Among us is represented every temperament. Alongside births, we've suffered our share of deaths. We're not rich. But we do read stories together most nights. Is that so special?

In our parents' time, television was new. I recall first using the internet half way through college. Even in living memory families were expected to entertain themselves. That's why music and reading, like evening rosaries and chores and games, used to be commonplaces under the roofs of Christian houses.

Sociologists say we've lost "social capital." I've always been unclear on what that term means. What is clear is that ordinary things, like having a mom and a dad, or having them remain married, or having mom at home during the day, or more than 1.6 kids around your table, have become strange, and so, I suppose, it should not be surprising that reading has too.

Real goods are fragile. In weak moments, late at night, my heart will now and again begin to pound. When I consider how easily "stropped-beak fortune" could topple what my wife and I have labored to build, I cross myself and ponder.

In our little kingdom, music lessons, family visits, as much as sickness, work, fatigue, sloth and more all threaten to throw off and overwhelm what routines we have built up in these past years, including our reading time; yet, there it remains, mostly fixed in our habit, rolling out after evening prayers, and before the children disperse to bed. And a few nights ago we finished reading Virgil's *Aeneid*.

This is not the first remarkable book we've read together. Lately, we've been on an "epic" kick. Earlier this fall we finished Homer's *Iliad* and then *Odyssey*, also in intelligent adaptations. After that it was a string of short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Since we had just returned to Canada after several years in New England, as an act of loving nostalgia we took up his *Tales of the White Mountains*, the most famous story in this sequence being *The Unexpected Guest* – a retelling of the 1826 Mount Willey slide that wiped away a young lad and a happy family.

Over the years books have helped shape the common memory of our household. For example, when we drove up to Prince Edward Island for a holiday, we listened to L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*. The island truly is enchanting. For most of us, though, I think the story of little Anne remains the most memorable part of that trip.

Other books, too, have stitched themselves into our common life. Everyone shudders at the word "dragon" because of *The Hobbit*. The never-ending rounds of *Narnia* have rendered vivid lamp posts, witches, and talking animals to all. After *Farmer Boy* at least two of my kids now want to ditch the city life.

I confess that for my wife and I, we also find it difficult to think of our children, at least when they pass through a certain age, outside of characters in *Winnie the Pooh*. One of our boys, and for entirely just reasons, I might add, is now forever named Henry Pootel (that's the name Christopher Robin gives to Piglet after Piglet pretends to be Roo, and Kanga delivers upon the mischievous creature an unwanted bath). We have been blessed by the books. Still, it struck me that I was happier finishing Virgil's story than I usually am after we come to the end of a tale.

The story is familiar enough. *The Aeneid* picks up where Homer left off. The Greeks have departed; Troy is razed; at the call of the gods a remnant flees. Aeneas gathers his weary companions in search of a homeland, one day destined to become Rome. *The Aeneid*, then, is a story about beginnings and endings. This is more than enough reason to love the book.

Yet the story is about much more. Virgil completed his epic about the same year that the Blessed Virgin Mary was born. Rome had shaken off a century of civil war. Octavian was now Caesar Augustus, undisputed master of the city and the world, set to rebuild both the brick and stone of the empire but also the faith and decency of its citizens.

Virgil likewise wanted his book to help rebuild. One of the aims of the work is to hold up before the Roman people a mirror. Romans, neither before nor after Virgil, would match the wisdom nor the fine arts of the Greeks; what they could offer the world was the justice born of self-mastery, as Humphries' translation has it:

"Others, no doubt, will better mould the bronze
To the semblance of soft breathing, draw, from marble,
The living countenance; and others pleased
With greater eloquence, or learn to measure,
Better than we, the pathways of the heaven,

The risings of the stars: remember, Roman,
To rule the people under law, to establish
The way of peace, to battle down the haughty
To spare the meek. Our fine arts, these, forever.”

Even as I set down these words I begin to see more clearly why I've loved reading this book. Reading the *Aeneid* to my sons recalls not only Roman but also Christian civilization. Virgil's story itself would weave its way into other even greater stories, stories laced with grace. *The Confessions* by St. Augustine comes to mind. Though the saint distances himself from the pagan tale he and every other boy learned at school, he found recounting his own story impossible without it. He regrets the love he attached to Dido's lament at the end of Book Four, after Aeneas' heart-wrenching departure. But Augustine can't help himself. He too will portray his own wanderings in the mould of another Aeneas.

The desperately clinging Dido, for all her beauty and charm, becomes, for the true pilgrim, an image of all that would distract us from our life's true destiny: the City of God. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is another example. There Virgil enters the action of the greatest Christian poem as Dante's personal guide. The Roman will lead the exiled Florentine through the stench of hell and up into the enticing aromas of purgatory until Dante is fit to stand on that summit where reason must bow before the stronger incense of grace.

Then there is the obvious attraction of the book's hero. Aeneas is many things. He is warrior, lover, founder, ruler, an image of piety, even a kind of figure of Christ. Above all he is a *man, vir*. That word comes from *virtus*, which at root means strength.

To be a man is to be one who has good cheer in the face of the unknown, not simply as a generic human being, nor as a worker, nor as somebody's 'partner,' but as one called to be both father and son. For my boys, what I want for them, after all, is virtue.

I shall go on pondering, I suspect. I felt great pleasure the other night, and gratitude, for my family, our sons and daughter, our tradition, our Church. Probably a few of my sons will study at the kind of colleges where books like the *Aeneid* are still read and loved.

Others, I expect, will follow the trades. Such differences of secular vocation hardly matter. What unites them is a common task. This task they share with their father and their grandfather and their uncles and their godfathers and all other sons and fathers: the ever-noble and presently daring task of becoming men.

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