

Sparks (Conversation Starters)

For Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

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Suggestions for use ▪ Use the following Sparks to start a conversation with a friend or group. Or journal with them, using them to get to “know yourself” — an imperative straight from the ancient Greeks.

Spark 1 ▪ Anger (What is anger like?)

Spark 1 Quotations

Homer sings, “Wrath! Sing goddess, about the destructive wrath of Achilles, the son of Peleus—the anger that caused so much pain and suffering among the Achaeans. Who could possibly measure it all? His anger sent many strong souls—the breath-like phantoms of men—down to the dark halls of Hades, while above, their fallen bodies became food for wild dogs and scavenging birds.”

Later, Achilles said to Thetis, “May strife utterly perish from among both the gods and men, and anger that incites a wise man to be savagely upset—an anger that drips like very sweet honey and expands like smoke in the breast of a man, growing ever larger. Even so has the lord of men Agamemnon now provoked me to anger.”

Spark 1 Questions

1. What is anger? How would you describe or define anger? What synonyms can you give for anger?
2. What is anger like? How do people look when they are angry? What do people do when they are angry? How does it feel to be angry? How does it feel to experience someone's anger (whether the person is angry at you or someone else)? Looking back at anger some time after the anger has passed, how do people typically feel or think about their anger?
3. What does anger do or accomplish? For the person who is angry? For the person who experiences the anger? What is the cost of anger? What are the benefits of anger (for you or another)? How can anger harm? How has anger benefited or harmed you? How has anger benefited or harmed others you know or care for?

Spark 2 ▪ Being your best (How can you be your best?)

Spark 2 Quotations

Nestor said to Patroclus, “Old Peleus insistently ordered his son Achilles to always be the best and to stand out among others.”

SPARKS (CONVERSATION STARTERS) ▪ FOR HOMER'S *ILIAD* AND *ODYSSEY*

Phoenix said to Achilles, "The old horseman Peleus sent me with you on the day he sent you out from Phthia to Agamemnon. You were then a silly child and knew nothing yet of distressing war nor of assemblies in which men stand out from others. For this reason, he sent me with you to instruct you in all these matters, to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds."

Spark 2 Questions

1. What does "best" mean? How would you define or describe "best"? What synonyms can you give for "best"?
2. What does it mean for someone to do their best? What about you?—what does it mean for you to do your best? What do you need to have, feel, think, or do to be your best?
3. What do wisdom and courage have to do with being your best? How can you transition from being less than your best (in anything) to being your best? Try to think of something concrete, specific.

Spark 3 ▪ Life and Death (the human condition)

Spark 3 Quotations

Glaukus said to Diomedes, "Why do you ask me about my lineage? Men come and go as the leaves do year after year upon the trees. The wind sheds the autumn leaves upon the ground, but when the spring returns, the forest buds again with fresh ones. The generations of mankind are like this. The new generation springs up as the old is passing away."

Apollo said to Poseidon, "Miserable mortals flourish now like green leaves in springtime, eating whatever the earth provides, but soon waste away and decay, falling lifeless to the ground."

Spark 3 Questions

1. How can human life be compared to the life cycle of a leaf through the course of a year (or through a few seasons)? Is this a good comparison? How so? How not? Can you think of a better comparison?
2. Both Glaukus and Apollo emphasize the problem side of the human condition—that humans "waste away and decay" and are "shed" (from the tree of life) and die, "falling lifeless to the ground," and finally "decay." Do you like their emphasis? Do you typically emphasize the problem or bad side of the human condition or what we might call the solution or good side?
3. Do you find hope in the notion that humans "flourish now like leaves in springtime"? Or that "when the spring returns, the forest buds again with new [human] leaves"? Or that "the new generation [of human beings] spring up as the old is passing away?" Explain why you do or do not find hope in these statements. Given these observations, do you believe Homeric people believed in an after life? Do you? Why or why not?

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Spark 4 ▪ Anger (How to deal with anger)

Spark 4 Quotations

Turning to Agamemnon, Nestor says, "And you, son of Atreus, check your wrath. I implore you to let go of your anger against this man, who is a towering wall for the Achaeans against all the evils of war."

After his best friend Patroclus dies, and agreeing to go out to battle, Achilles declares, "But now, though grieving, we will let these things go, allowing the dear spirit in our chests to be conquered since we must. And now I put a stop to my anger—of necessity I will not rage forever."

Odysseus says to Achilles, "Good friend, on the day when your father Peleus sent you to Agamemnon, he gave this command, saying, 'My son, . . . restrain the proud temper in your chest, for friendliness, kindness, and gentle mindedness are better. And let go of mischief-plotting strife so that the Argives . . . may honor you all the more.' . . . Even now I call on you to put away from you your bitter wrath. Agamemnon is offering many worthy gifts, so let go of your anger."

Spark 4 Questions

1. Think of one time you were angry in the past. How did you deal with your anger? Looking back, would have you done anything different? If so, what?
2. What is the best way to "let go of anger"? Next time you are angry, how can you "put a stop to" the anger you feel in your heart or chest?
3. If anger is a negative (insofar as it does some harm to you or another), what positives can you substitute in place of anger? What positive attitudes can you take on? What positive feelings can you cultivate? What's something positive you can think or say? What's something positive you can do?

Sparks related to Homer's *Odyssey* are on the way! Check back for more.



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"My father had me learn every word of Homer . . . to see me develop into a good man." —Niceratus of Athens

"Homer enthusiasts say that Homer has been the educator of Greece, and for the education and government of humans, we should build up our entire lives with the assistance of this poet." —Socrates of Athens

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