

The Myth of Harbard the Graybeard

By

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Thor decided to travel. He began walking, out of Asgard into the wilderness. After a long time he found himself in the northern wilderness. Great mountains loomed up like the bones of dead giants. The mountains were huge and stony and blocked out the northern sun that laid low in the sky.

Thor continued his journey, passing out of the mountain range and into the icy tundra. The vast, flat and windswept frozen earth of the tundra seemed to stretch into infinity. Finally, Thor came to a sound with a deep channel filled with icy waters. Blue and deadly cold, the waters seemed not to move, as if the sea itself was lifeless. There were no winds this far north, and the world seemed void of all life that is except for a lone figure on the far side of the channel.

Thor strained to see to the other side. He could make out the figure of a ferryman, with a long, gray beard, standing in the midday sun on a flat-bottomed boat.

“You there!” Thor called out, causing the water to quiver. “If you are a ferryman, then come to me, for I need your services!”

The figure on the far side stirred and stood up. He cupped his hands and shouted back. “Who are you, Oaf! And why do you shout to me?”

“I want you to ferry me across this channel!” Thor shouted back. “I will pay you well! I have some of the best food prepared and cooked in all the nine worlds. Herring and porridge I carry and I had more than my fill, and still I have enough that will keep you fed for years!”

The ferryman stood up and pulled his wide-rim hat down over his face. “Do not be in too much of a rush to return home,” he said. “Don’t be so high and mighty, for even the highest can be knocked down by grief, and you will find nothing but pain and grief when you arrive home, for your mother is no longer among the living.”

“My mother dead!” Thor cried. “How could that be? What grief could be worst?” Thor was visibly shaken by the ferryman’s pronouncement.

The ferryman took no notice of Thor’s shock and immediately began insulting him. “Look at yourself. You travel without shoes and you dress like a beggar. I doubt if you even have a house to call home.”

Thor ignored the insults and called for the ferryman to bring his boat across the channel. But the ferryman ignored Thor and even turned his back on him.

“Is that your boat, or does it belong to someone else?” Thor asked.

“It belongs to Hildolf, the slaughtering wolf. He has entrusted it to me. There is no one wiser. Rathsey, the Isle of Counsel is where he lives. Strict orders he has given me; take no horse thieves, or pilferers across in this boat. This boat was meant to ferry only the great and powerful. Let the thralls and peasants find other means to cross this channel. Before I can ferry



you across, I must know your name and discover if you are worthy.”

“I am Thor, the Thunderer, son of Odin, brother of Meili and father to Magni,” Thor said. “I am the strongest of the Gods and the defender of Asgard and Midgard.” Thor’s words caused the surface of the channel to ripple with waves that raced across to the other side and wash against the side of the ferryman’s boat. “Now tell me your name.”

“I have no need to hide my identity,” the ferryman said. “My name is Harbard, which means graybeard.”

“You make a point of letting me know that you do not hide your identity,” Thor said. “Do you have something to hide?”

“If I did, I would not try to hide it from the likes of you,” Harbard said.

Thor pulled on his red beard as he watched the surface of the water. “I would not waste my time getting wet by wading across the channel to teach you lessons in good manners. But when I do get on the other side, you had better make sure that I do not find you, for if I do, then I will repay your insolence.”

With his hands on his hips, Harbard threw his head back and laughed at Thor’s threat. “Here I am and I will not set one foot from this place. If you want to repay me, then come around, but I warn you, you have not met my equal since you fought Hrungrnir.”

“You know of my fight with Hrungrnir?” Thor asked. “Well, as big as he was, and even though his head was made of stone, I still beat him and killed him in the end. What were you doing when I sent Hrungrnir to his grave?”

“Five winters I spent with Fjolvar on the island of Algron. We wage war in its most terrible form, sinking our staffs in heroes as well as in virgins. No one escaped our wrath.”

Thor thought once more about what Harbard told him. “And how did you fare with the women?”



“They were glad to surrender themselves to us,” Harbard said. “But they had no other choice, for they could not escape us any more than they could make rope from sand. And they gave themselves to me first. Seven sisters willingly gave themselves to me at once, and what ecstasy they could give? And what about you, Thor? What were you doing?”

“I killed the giant Thiazzi, and then I flung the eyes of Alvaldi’s son into the heavens, where they still hang as stars. They bear witness to my greatness. And did you do, Harbard?”

“I called all the witches together and we conjured love craft,” Harbard said. “And I received from the giant, Hlebard a magic branch after I beat him in a contest of wits.”

“Is that how you repay a generosity?” Thor asked.

Harbard shrugged and shouted across the channel. “Each man must do what is necessary to win in the game of life, just as the mighty oak will take what nourishment it needs from its surroundings to grow. But Thor, what did you do?”

“I invaded Jotunheim and put to death as many giants and giant women as possible. In this way I saved Midgard from their plans to invade the land of men. And you, Greybeard, what were you doing?”

“I caused war to erupt in Valland, the land of slaughter. I set princes against each and put an end to peace.”

Thor listened and thought about the words that the ferryman spoke.

“After they fell in battle, they were welcomed into Odin’s hall, Valhalla, and this made Odin happy,” the ferry man said and then smiled. “But you, Thor, all you care for are the concerns of thralls.”

“Not thralls, but the common, hard-working folk,” Thor said. “I am evenhanded in the affairs of both men and Gods, unlike you.”

“That is because, while your limbs are as strong as steel, your heart is as soft as down,” jeered Harbard. “You can’t help but let fear overcome you, and it caused you to crawl into the thumb of a glove. So frozen with fear, you hid like a child under his bed.”

“You womanish ferryman,” Thor said. “If not for this channel of water that separates us, I’d send you off to Hel.”

“Why?” Harbard asked. “What quarrel do we have? But Thor, what did you do next?”

“When I was in the east,” Thor said, “I found the sons of Svarang on the banks of the Iving.” Thor then picked up a boulder ten times his size, and flung it effortlessly across the channel. Harbard stepped aside as the boulder passed by him, and it buried itself deep into the hill behind him. “They threw boulders like that, at me,” Thor said. “But it did them little good. They were soon begging me to forgive them. And you, Harbard, what were you doing?”

“I also was in the east, but I met a linen-white maid and won her heart. We met in secret and she surrendered herself to me. I held her down and enjoyed her natural gifts,” Harbard said.

“A fortunate man, you were,” Thor said.

“I could have done with your help to hold the lady down,” Harbard said.

“I wish I could have been there,” Thor said.

“Perhaps,” Harbard said, “But I doubt if I could have trusted you, for I know of your reputation for breaking oaths.”

“Never!” Thor shouted. “That is a lie.”

“But what were you doing, Thor?” the ferryman asked,

“I was on Hlesey, the island that belonged to the sea God,” Thor said. “There I slew the she-devils. Serpent-like they were, and fit to be the brides of Berserkers.”

“You have brought shame on you head, Thor,” Harbard said. “You now boast of killing women. Is that how you got your reputation as a ‘lady killer’?”

“They were maids, but were-creatures - more wolf than human,” Thor protested. “Like waves in a stormy sea, they attacked my ship with iron clubs. But what were you doing, Harbard?”

“I raised an army on the frontier of Asgard,” Harbard said.

“But did you lead it to defend Asgard, or to attack Asgard?” Thor asked.

“Don’t fret, Thor,” Harbard laughed. “To calm your fears, I will give you a little ring as a token of my desire for peace.”

Thor was livid with rage. He kicked and stumped. He gripped Mjollnir in his fist and waved it about his head, as if he was getting ready to throw it. “You are the foulest creature ever, and your foulness is only surpassed by your insults,” Thor said.

“If they are foul, it is because they were taught to me by old men who lived in the hills of home,” Harbard said.

“Hills of home?” Thor said. “A fine name for barrows.”

“That’s the name I gave them,” Harbard said. “There are no one wiser or possessing sharper tongues than the dead who have lived long and are well experienced.”

“And their sharpness of tongue that you have learned so well, will be the death of you yet,” Thor said. “If ever I reach your side of the channel, I will make you howl louder than the biggest wolf whom I might hit with my hammer.”

Harbard changed the subject. “And who is your fair wife, Sif, entertaining when you are away? You should conserve your strength for when you must deal with her lover.”

“Lout! Fool!” Thor roared. His beard bristled red with fire and his flashed hot like fire. “Shut your lying mouth or I’ll shut it for you!”

The ferryman stood, leaning on his staff. His one eye peered out from under the wide brim of his hat. "You had better hurry home, Thor. Oh, but you are running late, because you were not able to cross this channel on my boat. What a pity."

"You kept me waiting," Thor shouted. "Your womanish antics delayed me." Thor was now pacing up and down like a caged animal. His fury was building until he could not contain it any longer. Thunder and lightning flashed and rumbled, but the ferryman just stood and watched the Thunder God. "I never thought a mere ferryman could best the strongest and bravest of the Gods. If you know what's good for you, you had better row your boat to me and ferry me across."

"Go away!" Harbard shouted. "I will not ferry you across."

Thor stood by the water's edge. He could see his reflection in the mirror-like surface of the channel. He realized that the wit of the ferryman had bested the brute force of Asathor. Brute force alone was not enough to deal with one's adversary. One had to have the wit and cunning mind of a fox combined with the furious nature of a wolf to provide the best defense. "If you will not ferry me across, at least direct me as to the best way around this channel."

"Take the way to your left. Toward Midgard it will lead you," Harbard said. "Once in Midgard, you will find your mother and she will show you the fastest way to Asgard."

"How long will it take me to return home?" asked Thor.

"If you walk fast and don't rest, you will make it home before sunrise," Harbard said.

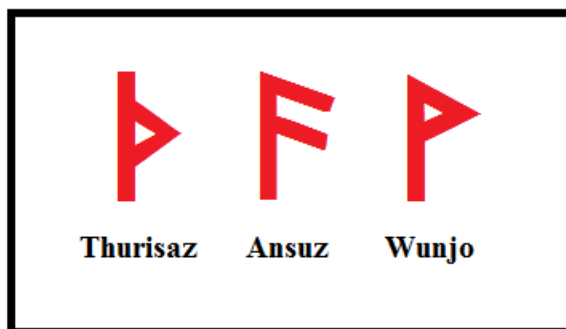
"We've talked long enough," Thor said. "It's time I go on my way." Thor then turned and left. He could hear the belittling laughter of the ferry man in his ears as he departed.

The Meaning of This Myth

Harbard is clearly Odin, and the story of Harbard is not a tale between father and son, but of a long-forgotten time when Odin replaced Thor as the leader of the Gods. The story is also a lesson that brute force alone is often not enough to win a struggle. Most of the time one should rely on cunning and wisdom. This is what is meant by having a well-planned strategy. The story also explores the different natures of the two Gods. Odin is the God of princes and kings, traditionally, which meant the leaders of nations, empires and communities. But with leadership comes cunning and guile. I am reminded of Machiavelli's, *The Prince*, in which he describes two types of leaders - a fox and a lion. The former rules by guile and cunning while the latter rules through fear and brute force. But Machiavelli suggests that the most effective leader is one who is both fox and lion. The nature of Odin is very different from that of Thor. When dealing with Odin - beware! He is bound by no oath other than that which he has made to himself. But Thor is much more trustworthy. He is bound by the oath that is made on his hammer. Those who are very ambitious will seek Odin's favor, but they must chance his mercurial nature. These men would do anything for power and would have remained at the channel with the ferryman. But they can never be sure if he will decide to betray them, and cause them to die and join him in

Valhalla. But men who live purely according to honor and loyalty will most likely have followed Thor when he left the channel.

Thor is the strongest of the Gods. His physical strength is unbeatable. He is the defender of the Gods against the eternal assault of the forces of Chaos personified by the Giants. Within



Midgard he is known to be the most trustworthy of the Gods. Men and women can call on him for help and he will never betray them. People make the sign of the hammer for luck and wear pendants of his hammer around their necks or from their belts. But one of the less of this myth is that physical strength alone is not enough to maintain order and justice within a society. Thor has within him Giant blood. His mother is a Giant, and he inherits additional Giant blood from his father Odin. Thus, while Thor is the defender of both Asgard and Midgard, brute strength without wisdom can be a dangerous force that can cause self-destruction.

His duel with Harbard, who is in reality Odin, tells us that no matter how strong you are physically, you are extremely weak if your physical force is not accompanied with wisdom. This is the important of the father-son team of Odin and Thor. Together they are the strongest force within the entire pantheon of Gods. Even their Runes, Ansuz for Odin, representing wisdom and the knowledge to harness Vril through the use of the Runes, and Thurisaz, Thor's Rune, representing the breaking force that can cause great destruction, are very similar to look at. Thurisaz also looks similar to one of Odin's other Runes, Wunjo. The shapes of Rune are very important in how they shape the currents of Vril energy that they harness. We can see from these three Runes how the combined forces of Odin and Thor is a very potent and powerful force for good in our lives.

If you look at Wunjo, you can imagine a banner flying full mass on its flag pole, while Thurisaz can be compared to a flag at half-mass. Thus raising the strength and brute force to a higher level (of consciousness) brings the harmony and fulfillment of wishes that is the runic principle of Wunjo. Then look at Ansuz. There is an arm at the top that can fit nicely to the upper arm of Wunjo, while the lower arm of Ansuz fits nicely over the upper arm of Thurisaz. Thus the knowledge and wisdom of Odin (Ansuz) can elevate and/or transform the brutal reality of life into one where our wishes are fulfilled and there is perfect harmony.

This is only one lesson we can learn from this Myth. Each Myth is a storehouse of infinite lessons. We have only to learn to look and discover the meanings behind each Myth. But this take practice and knowledge on how to reveal these hidden lessons. We in Balder Rising teach how to do this in our training program and in our classes. It is the purpose of the

Church of Balder Rising to train an order of Erulians (Erilaz) that we refer to as Vril Lords and Vril Ladies, who are members of the Vrilir.