

I've been a professor for 40 years, but teaching Greek to an eight-year-old may be my crowning achievement

## **It started with a FaceTime call with my grandson.**

by [Beverly R. Gaventa](#) in the [December 16, 2020](#) issue



(Photo © Luminelimages / iStock / Getty)

It crept up on me, the impact of the pandemic. First came the reports of outbreaks elsewhere, then the extension of spring break in my own university, then the movement of classes online. Then the shutdown of churches and businesses and physicians' offices. About that time, in the middle of March, I shut down too. An aggravating meme circulated the notion that biblical scholars worked on, churning out books and articles, unaffected by the pandemic, but that was not true of me nor of most of my friends. I shut down.

I cast about for something to do, some way in which to be of help, but the options are limited—especially for vulnerable seniors with limited skill sets. The most obvious path was to help with the care of my grandson, Charlie, since his parents were thrown into the deep end of managing their own work-from-home situations while also supervising his every hour. But even that happy path was blocked by the wise recognition that we all needed to let significant time elapse before we could

safely be together.

What to do? Almost as a joke, I asked whether Charlie might enjoy learning a little Greek. To my astonishment, he jumped at the chance, and that is how I came to have a standing appointment to teach Greek from 2:45 to 3:30, over FaceTime, five days a week, to an eight-year-old.

I have been teaching for over 40 years. I have taught undergraduates, seminarians, and doctoral candidates. I have taught adult education and continuing education courses by the score. But teaching Greek to an eight-year-old may be my crowning achievement. To begin with, this is the very epitome of an elective course of study. It clearly would last only as long as his interest lasted. Doing it over FaceTime made it harder to hold his attention, harder to stay together in the enterprise.

Each letter was an achievement for both of us. To be sure, the *zēta ēta thēta* was easy enough to remember, if cruel to imagine poor Theta being devoured by someone named Zeta. But the end of the alphabet is not so easy, to say nothing of the letter *epsilon*. After a couple of dozen corrections, I decided that *elspion* was close enough. Truth to tell, I'll be sorry when he finally gets that one straightened out. Along the way there were giggles, silly mnemonic devices, and spontaneous jingles I would never try in a "normal" classroom.

I knew that I was having the time of my pedagogical life. What came as a surprise was hearing from the eavesdroppers—Charlie's parents and my husband—that our sessions were a highlight of their days as well. Charlie was learning a bit of Greek, I was stretching my old skills in a new and beloved direction, and our family was caught up in delight.

By late spring, we had moved on to words. *Ballōis* easy, since there's nothing he likes better than throwing a ball. He enjoys a vigorous pronunciation of *dikaiosynē* and has no trouble remembering "justice." Declining nouns and understanding verb paradigms? Well, that's another challenge.

This is, of course, a small family story, told by one who experiences numerous privileges. I understand that. I also understand that my lifelong vocation endures, that it changes, and that it lightens even these days.

One of Charlie's first Greek words was the word for joy, *chara*. I pronounced it loudly, *chara!* Charlie responded with his own enthusiastic *chara!*, adding, "*Chara*, that's

what we will have when the coronavirus goes away!" Yes, darling child, we will have joy then, but we also have it now, granted moments of delight even as the months go by and the losses mount.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Teaching my grandson Greek."*